

Stars Rain Down

by Chris J. Randolph



oktopod

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To my parents, Barry and Christine, who've endured more of my day-dreaming, silliness and slacking than anyone ever could have expected. Thank you for literally everything.

A massive thanks also to Steven, Bob, and Dianna for your support, patience and understanding. You keep me sane-ish, and this never could have happened without you... I leave you to decide whether that's a good thing or not.

Chapter 0:

There was nothing left but a single fortress, its armor tarnished and its silhouette a black mark against the burnt sky. The metropolis surrounding it had been pummeled into bloodstained rubble and shattered glass, and the scene was the same across twelve continents. Where the Somari empire had once flourished in all its glory and arrogance, now only the fortress remained.

At its foot, where the air was clotted with shrapnel and ragged flames, the last survivors of the Trans-Continental Army made their final stand. They had been pinned down and slowly strangled to death, forced to take cover behind the mutilated remains of their civilization while spitting fire at anything that moved. Without hope for victory or escape, they were walking ghosts fueled by rage, too stubborn to admit they were already dead.

And still the invaders pressed on, coming at them from every direction. Enemy infantry advanced tirelessly over broken ground, leading the way for mechanized monsters whose artillery howled through the swirling dust. Each blast bit into the fortress' failing armor and inched the war closer to its end.

Meanwhile, within the fortress and far from the crumbling line, sounds of the fight became a baleful symphony. Cannon fire beat an uneven rhythm, accompanied by a melody of screaming jets and the bark of ten thousand rifles. Strained voices cried out in chorus, then were silenced once and for all.

This song came to Kai while he slept and dreamed. He ran from one nightmare landscape to the next, chased by a living machine that devoured the ground beneath him. The unstoppable beast chewed up and swallowed whole civilizations to feed its hunger, and still it craved more.

Then an explosion rocked Kai's incubation tank and he was awake. The nightmare world dissolved only to be replaced by the chaos of reality.

He blinked and blinked again but his eyes refused to focus. The world was blurry and ill defined, tinted by the cold blue gestational fluids. Something wasn't right. The incarnation process wasn't complete, but he knew there had to be an explanation.

A staccato series of explosions thumped at the chamber's walls, and Kai struggled to keep cool. It was no time to panic. He pressed his eyes closed

and slowly opened them, and this time the image became sharper. The laboratory was in shambles; sparks danced from the ceiling, and rows of mangled birthing tanks dangled limply from their umbilical cords.

A pair of genetechs in red gowns rushed over to him, one carrying an armload of clothing. The color had long ago drained from their faces, and their wrinkled hands shook as they went to work at the console. Their expressions spoke of terror mixed with sadness.

Somehow, Kai kept his head in check.

The string of lights at the top of the tank changed color and their blinking pattern became insistent. He understood the message, but the gravity of it didn't strike him. Not that it mattered. There wasn't any way to prevent what came next.

There was a rumble and the ratcheting of mechanical locks. The viscous fluid drained from the tank a moment later, exposing his partially developed skin to fresh air. There wasn't any pain. Not yet.

Then the front of the tank opened and dropped him onto the cold metal floor where he curled up like a newborn. He wanted so badly to remain calm, but he had no chance. There was simply too much pain, and it grew so loud that it blotted out every other thought until only a mewling animal remained.

His mind retreated while his body rebelled. The tendons of his jaw stretched around a silent scream, and a series of quick convulsions violently ejected liquid from his lungs. More blue fluid splashed across the floor, reflecting the flickering ceiling lamps on its silken surface.

The genetechs were speaking, but Kai was somewhere else. Somewhere far away, out of communication range. It took several long minutes for the wounded animal to subside, and finally allow rational thoughts to re-emerge.

"It's too early," one of them said.

"Nonsense. His nervous system is fully formed, and cellular automata are functioning within acceptable parameters. Sinit Kai, can you hear me?"

"Yes," he mumbled feebly. His mouth was an unfamiliar instrument. "Why?" he managed to ask.

The older genetech crouched down beside him. The scientist might have been a mountain once, but decades of erosion had left him shriveled, withered and craggy. "Our time has run out, Kai. You must leave this place while the path remains open."

Kai coughed and more fluid wrestled its way out of his throat. "I need to get to the front lines. The war..."

The genetech placed a hand under Kai's chin, and gently lifted his head. "There is no war," he said. "All you hear is the last gasp of the dying."

"It's a funeral," the other genetech said.

"How?"

The scientist shook his head as he spoke. "We lost at Sylus Gate, and the rest of our defenses collapsed in a cascade."

The other said, "Locara, Asheth, Telarius Point, and finally here. Each one a total defeat."

Kai looked down at his incomplete hand. The structure was in place, but patches of half-formed skin scarcely covered the lattice-work of muscle machinery. If his estimates were correct, that placed him in the eleventh day of incubation. His entire world had been conquered in just thirteen days.

His mind raced. "I'm still asleep," he said.

The genetech said, "I hope you're right, and that you soon wake."

As the last word came out of the genetech's mouth, the far end of the chamber exploded. Flames clawed through the wall, and spit forth shards of razor sharp metal.

Something clicked in Kai's head and engineered instinct took over. He plotted the trajectory of every moving object in the chamber and launched into the air, twisting and contorting to avoid the shrapnel that ricocheted all around.

An instant later, the room was quiet once again, and Kai found himself crouched over the genetechs' remains. The hail of metal had shred them to pieces, and their blood now mixed with the blue gestational fluid in swirls. In spirals.

"Go," one of them gasped. "The lowest level. The machine waits." Then he was gone.

Kai stuffed the bundle of clothes under his arm and ran. The tunnels leading away from the laboratory were twisted, warped, and empty except for the sound of his feet pounding across the stone floor and the rumble of approaching fire. He was running through a graveyard, and the graveyard was burning.

Level by level, he wound his way through the maze of corridors and descended deeper into the ground. All the while, sounds of the battle grew

louder as one floor after the next was stripped away by the unstoppable fury of the invaders.

He reached the last subfloor and sprinted toward the central hub while the heavy bulkheads closed behind him, permanently sealing the crypt.

Then he was there, wherever there was. The room was another lab, this one bright white and circular. It was clean and totally untouched by the war that had demolished his planet. A sarcophagus-like capsule stood at its center amid an overgrowth of cables and machinery.

Kai wasn't sure what to do next. He dug through the bundle of clothes until he found a mission-computer, a hollow metallic cylinder with an eery sheen, and he latched the device around his wrist like a shackle. Once closed, it adjusted itself to his arm and then he felt the familiar tingle of it interfacing with his nervous system.

The computer's screen lit up and words began to scroll by, which he simultaneously heard echoed in the back of his head. Its voice was childlike and boisterous. "Initializing... Initialization complete. Greetings, Sinit Kai. You will be pleased to know that all of my systems are functioning at maximum efficiency."

The older models weren't so cloyingly personable. "Sure. Great," he said as he slipped into his uniform. "What's my mission?"

"You're a rude one. No matter. Your mission is simple. You need only step into the capsule, and it will do the rest."

Kai fastened the last of his buttons and tugged his jacket to make sure it was straight. The self-healing material of the uniform sealed itself against his half-formed skin, and the last of the pain disappeared. "I don't follow. What does this capsule do?"

"How strange. I thought Sinit-class infiltrators were supposed to follow orders without question."

"Things change," Kai said. "And I seem to be the entire chain of command now."

The computer took a moment to process that. "Well, if you absolutely must know, the capsule is an experimental transit system. There's a significant chance it will deliver us to a distant star... or it may annihilate us in a lovely show of lights. To be quite honest, I'm not sure which is more likely."

"Comforting." Kai didn't take long to make his decision. At least the capsule offered some chance of survival. He stepped inside and tried to

make himself comfortable. “To what end?”

“Our intelligence operatives were able to determine the enemy’s next target, and the device is programmed to deliver you there. Upon arrival, you will have two objectives.”

The capsule closed, and hissed as its pressure seals locked into place.

“Get on with it, machine.”

“You are terribly impatient, you know that? I was getting there. Your first objective is to protect me. I was implanted with a shard of the Primogenitor’s holographic data-core, and I now contain the entire stored knowledge of our people. Our accomplishments must not be forgotten. Your other objective is to deliver a message.”

The hiss slowed to a halt, and was followed by a series of warbling tones that caused the capsule to vibrate. Their volume raised until the entire vessel became one great tuning fork.

Then it happened. There was a bright flash, and the capsule climbed up and up through the many layers of the ruined fortress and further into the bleeding sky. The teeming ranks of the enemy stretched away in all directions, covering the land to the far horizon.

Once the capsule was clear, a furiously burning light swelled up out of the fortress and engulfed the land. It raced out and swallowed the invaders, burning and crackling as it went. As the planet shrank away from Kai’s view, the whole world was eaten by the blinding power of that light, and then it all blinked out at once.

“What in creation?” Kai asked.

“There will be no surrender, Sinit Kai. The Somari race died today, but the enemy paid dearly for their victory.”

The whole situation was too surreal. Kai’s head swam and he prayed to wake up, but it was no use. He was alone in a strange capsule hurtling through the blackness of space, and the world he knew was gone. “Tell me, what message am I to deliver?”

“Tell the universe that the Nefrem have awakened. Tell them the devourer is coming.”

The mission-comp’s words echoed through his mind as the remains of his homeworld disappeared from view, and he heard them over and over until he finally drifted off to sleep. It was a sleep haunted by a billion wailing ghosts, and the spectre of strange worlds yet to come.

Chapter 1:

The Hidden

Dr. Marcus Donovan was looking through a rectangular porthole. A thick pane of clear polycarbonate separated him from the cold emptiness of space and the radiant blue, green and white-flecked Earth some 300 kilometers beyond. It was mid-morning down there in New Zealand, and he idly wondered what details escaped his sight from this distance.

“You ever get tired of staring out the windows, Marc?”

Without turning, he knew that Dr. Vijay Rao, his best friend and second in command, was floating in the doorway. They had played out this scene a hundred times before on a series of orbital platforms looking out over every continent but Antarctica. It was their routine. “Tired? Maybe someday, Jay. Not today.”

“I honestly wish I had your love for it. I mean, I was pretty starry eyed my first time up, but I could forget there are windows at all these days. Know what I mean?”

Marcus dragged a dark brown finger across the transparent surface, tracing the line where blue-green water met the thin beige strip of beach so far away. “No, don’t think I do. This is the whole reason I’m here. Mom always said I had my head in the clouds, but she was only half-way there.”

He turned, pushed himself away from the window and floated toward the open door, lightly brushing at a series of hand-rails as he went. “I take it the array’s ready to roll.”

Rao waved him on. “She passed all diagnostics with flying colors. Just waiting for you to throw the switch, boss.”

“Lead on,” Marcus said, and together they made their way through the heart of the Copernicus Observatory like creatures born to weightlessness, until the narrow tunnel opened up into the spherical command center. The walls there were covered with workstations, each with its own technician and glowing terminal, except at the room’s equator where a ring of windows revealed the Earth beneath them, the sun above and countless stars in every direction.

“Commander on the bridge!” someone shouted, and the crew snapped to attention.

“Damn jokers,” Marcus muttered. He wasn’t a stickler for protocol, or anything remotely like formality for that matter. The Global Aerospace Foundation drove him batty with that stuff, and everyone knew it. “Back to your stations, people. We’re three weeks ahead of schedule, but there’s still work to do.”

He pushed off and drifted out into the middle of the room, and stopped by gently colliding with his own station. Rao trailed a meter behind him. “Jansen, bring the generators up to full output and start cycling the capacitors,” Marcus said.

“Already on it, sir.”

“Park, bring the array about. You know where I want to look.”

“Aye, sir.”

“We only get one chance at this. Let’s make it count.”

Rao patted him on the shoulder. “You’re a liar, Marc. The only reason you’re up here is to tilt at this little windmill of yours.”

Marcus cracked a smile. “One man’s windmill is another man’s giant. Ms. Park, are we ready?”

“Coordinates locked and ready to scan, sir.”

Rao put on a gambler’s smile. “Bet you fifty credits we only come up with rocks and empty space this time.”

“Make it a hundred and you’re on.”

They shook hands, and Marcus turned, saying, “Commence scanning, full spectrum at eighty-five percent intensity.”

With that, the Copernicus Observatory was momentarily filled with an ear-splitting whine as its massive capacitors discharged, followed by the deep electronic hum of its multi-megawatt scanning array. No one spoke for minutes as they awaited the first results.

Ms. Park finally called out, “We’re receiving data, sir. Should I pipe it over to the main viewer?”

“Yeah. Let’s see what we’ve got.”

A three-dimensional holograph blinked into existence in the center of the room, at first indistinct like a roiling cloud of smoke. Park worked furiously at her station and the image became more crisp, but it remained speckled with noise that frustrated any attempt to make sense of it.

Marcus pushed away from his station and toward the projection. “That’s no good. Raise the background radiation filter’s threshold another twelve percent.”

“Aye, sir.”

It came into focus with crystal clarity. “I’ll be damned,” Rao said near whisper. “I’m out another hundred bucks.”

“Hello again, Zebra-One,” Marcus said to the image, greeting it like an old friend. He watched the display’s clock tick away, and when it reached thirty-five seconds, the object vanished from sight. He wasn’t at all surprised. “You’re getting slower, you little tease.”

“Should we continue scanning, sir?”

“No point,” he said. “That’s all we’ll ever get with this equipment. Switch over to the deep space survey program. Mr. Shen, inform Bangalore the array is on-line. Tell ‘em we’re prepared to hand-off control to the ground.”

Marcus Donovan pulled his datapad out of its holster and dialed back the recording to the thirtieth second, and there floating in front of him was the anomaly he’d personally discovered seven years earlier. He was stationed aboard the Brahe Array at the time, an orbital telescope like Copernicus but older and mustier, tasked with routine scans of the asteroid belt. That’s when he stumbled upon her, a dozen kilometers long, oddly striped and density all wrong to be an asteroid. Then, before he could get a decent look, she was gone just as suddenly as he’d found her. That first peek was only five seconds long, but it changed his entire life.

During the months that followed, Marcus used every spare minute aboard Brahe to re-scan the belt, but he only found rocks and more rocks behind them. He personally oversaw diagnostics and checked each piece of hardware by hand, and he went over his data with a fine-toothed comb, but he always arrived at the same answers: there was no malfunction, he had seen something, and now he could not.

Marcus named the anomaly Zebra-One for the strange stripes along her length, as well as her talent for disappearing into the grass.

His secret obsession transformed him. He grew from an undistinguished junior researcher into one of the single most dedicated, knowledgeable and experienced minds in deep space study, and it wasn’t long before the Foundation took notice. Offers poured in from more prestigious stations, and with nothing left for him aboard Brahe, he left.

The next few years, he toured through every station that would have him, and picked up a reputation as a true-blue problem solver. He became the Foundation’s patch kit, their answer to projects that were over-budget or

behind schedule. All the while, he continued hunting for his zebra, and at each stop he enjoyed another brief glimpse of her before she vanished from sight. With each look he grew more obsessed.

His reputation spread and he attracted some of the best, brightest and most eccentric minds in astrophysics, like Dr. Vijay Rao. Before he knew it, Marcus was in charge of a thirty-man team of problem solvers, who came to be called the Gypsies because they never stayed anywhere for long. They moved onto a station, dragged a troubled project back on track, and then departed for the next.

When the Foundation finalized plans for the Copernicus Observatory, the Gypsies were offered first crack at bringing the newest and most expensive deep space sensor array on-line. Marcus jumped at the offer without a second thought.

Now, six months later and more than three weeks ahead of schedule, Dr. Marcus Donovan was staring at the clearest freeze-frame yet produced of the object of his obsession. She floated there among the asteroids, half blanketed in a layer of sediment, but revealing patches of glistening hull here and there. She was some kind of vessel, of that much Marcus was sure.

He keyed his pad and the holograph rotated slowly. It was now clear that she had two separate hulls, one more than thirteen kilometers long, and the other about two-thirds that length.

Rao floated up beside him, staring in disbelief. "I've been riding you all this time, but... I can't say it... I think you're right, Marc."

"Of course I'm right, ye of little faith." Marcus was still staring intently at the holograph, soaking in every fresh detail. "Not to be an ass, but last month, I seem to recall you betting fifty credits that my theory was, and I quote, 'wrong wrong one hundred percent wrong.'"

"When will I stop gambling? Hey, take a look at that," Rao said, changing the subject. "The stripes aren't visible."

Marcus dragged his finger across the datapad's screen, and the display cycled through different EM bandwidths. He stopped when it showed the object in dark blue streaked with glowing red-orange stripes. The amount of fine detail was startling.

"Ho-lee cow," Rao said. "Those stripes are internal. If I didn't know better, I'd say the patterns look... biological?"

When the words registered in Marcus' head, the structures took on a whole new shape. Rao was right. They weren't stripes at all; they were

branching veins connected to some central organ. “Ummm...”

Marcus fumbled at the keypad and rewound ten seconds then started advancing frame by frame. Little by little, the veins grew brighter, then dimmed and grew brighter again. He rewound and watched it again, and one more time. The veins were pulsating. It... she was alive.

“You’re a genius, Jay.”

“No shit.”

Marcus’ mind was racing a little over 299 million meters per second. Alive. Zebra-One wasn’t a vessel at all, but a living creature that had been lying dormant in the asteroid belt for at least the past seven years. Judging by the accumulation of minerals, she might have been there much, much longer. How long? What did it mean? He couldn’t even begin to imagine the ramifications of his discovery.

Then he made a decision that was too long in coming. “I need to see her,” he said quietly.

Rao said, “Come again?”

Marcus blinked and then shook his head as if waking from a daydream. “I have to go see her, Jay. By hook or by crook, any damn way I can.”

“Sure thing. Let me call the Appropriations Committee. I’ll just tell ‘em we’ve found an enormous space serpent, and that we need a ship so we can take her out for lunch. That’ll be rubber stamped without a second thought, y’know, what with their stance on extraterrestrial life.”

Marcus watched the recording loop several more times. “Sarcasm duly noted,” he said, and started to chew on his lower lip. Then his eyes lit up. “Didn’t you write a long-winded paper about exotic materials?”

“My graduate thesis? Theoretical Conditions for the Formation of Metallic Hydrogen in Deep Space.”

Marcus smirked. “Lovely title. You’ve lost your naming rights.”

“Okay... Zebra-One?”

“You make a fair point. Dr. Rao, what would you say if I asked you to help me falsify months worth of sensor readings?”

Rao scratched his head while dozens of emotions momentarily bubbled to the surface and disappeared. When the bubbling stopped, he said, “Tell you what... knock fifty credits off my debt, and I’ll forget about the pesky ethics course I took as an undergrad.”

“You’re a scoundrel and a scholar, Jay. You should’ve asked for the whole debt.”

“Really?”

“Too late. We’ve work to do.”

Chapter 2:

First Response

Jack Hernandez was rechecking his equipment when the ride began to buck and shake. The metal cabin dipped and shuddered violently, but the U-shaped metal restraint over his shoulders kept him planted firmly in his seat. At this point in his career, trans-atmospheric flight was slightly more exciting than riding a commuter train.

“Man, hell of ride, ain’t it?” Corpsman Walters asked. He was trying to sound cheery, but the quivering in his voice hinted otherwise.

Jack didn’t bother to look up. “Skip, right? Nothing but a little turbulence. You just hang tight and everything will be peachy.”

The cabin lurched up and then back down again accompanied by a rumble like nearby thunder. “Jeeez-Us. You ever... ever wonder what would happen if something went wrong?”

“What’s to wonder about? The tranzat is biting back into the atmosphere at twenty times the speed of sound. If anything went wrong, we’d be hamburger. Wouldn’t even know what hit us.”

It occurred to Jack that last part might have been a faux pas. He lifted his head and looked over at Walters, who was strapped into an identical seat to his right, with both white-knuckled hands clenched around his shoulder restraint. This was Skip’s first drop and it showed.

Jack gave him a little pat on the shoulder. “Relax, newbie. I’ve been through more drops than I can count, and this is nothing out of the ordinary. Right, guys?”

The twenty members of the San Jose Bravo Brigade ignored him. Each was strapped into their own seat on either side of the leviathan’s cabin, separated by five meters of floor filled with equipment. A few were checking their gear like Jack had been, while others were thumbing through magazines. Lisa Albright had her headphones on and was listening to some band no one else had ever heard of, and Leonid Nikitin was sound asleep and snoring.

“See,” Jack said, as if his question had been met with unanimous agreement, “nothing to fret your little head over.”

Right about then, the blue lamp at the front of the cargo bay came on; drop was imminent. “Oh boy. Now Skip, I want you to take a nice deep breath and try to relax. Can you do that for me?”

Skip nodded his head rigidly.

“And if you gotta puke, you damn well hold it until we’re back on terra firma, or I’ll watch you scrub down the whole boat.”

A quick series of loud mechanical thuds echoed through the cabin as the docking clamps released, and then the leviathan shifted and slid free of its cradle. The windows along the length of the cabin, which had been black throughout the rest of the trip, were suddenly filled with blindingly bright blue sky, the javelin shaped trans-atmospheric transport that had dropped them, and a half-dozen other glimmering orange leviathans also in free-fall. Jack thought the view was just marvelous.

Skip Walters screamed. Thinking back, Jack had screamed his first time, too.

Not today, though. Not for a half-dozen years. These days, he loved plummeting out of the sky. It meant the trip was nearly over, and he’d soon be pounding dirt in another foreign land.

Skip screamed until his lungs were spent, but before he could take his next breath, the cabin was filled with the sound of the leviathan’s twin rotor blades rhythmically chopping at the air. The free-fall was complete, and the helicopter was flying under its own power. Another second later, it leveled off and began its approach.

As the leviathan descended and came around, the rear door opened to reveal forested hills and a monstrous plume of smoke rising high into the air. The helicopter tilted back, providing a good view of the grassy Earth below, while the two heavily laden pallets at the back of the cabin slid down the ramp, sprouted parachutes and drifted away.

Then it was down, down, down to the ground. The leviathan slowed, and its suspension groaned as the landing struts dug into soil. The pilot’s voice broke in over the loud speaker, “Welcome to lovely Santiago De Compostela, Spain. Once your restraints pop, you’ve got five minutes to disembark. No more. Take your crap with you, and thanks for flying Emergency Response Corps Air.”

The U-shaped restraints audibly popped and then raised themselves over-head, and the brigade stomped down the ramp. Skip charged out ahead

of them, and after three long strides across the ground, he was on his knees and evacuating his stomach violently in the grass.

Lisa Albright nudged Jack's shoulder to get his attention. "First drop?" she shouted over the thunder of the leviathan's rotors, motioning toward the new corpsman.

Jack nodded and said, "Another fine day in the Corps."

He glanced into the cabin to make sure his people were out and transmitted an all clear, then motioned toward Skip. He and Albright flanked the vomiting corpsman and moved him over to the side, while the emptied leviathan lifted back into the air and was away.

They were in a clearing at the southern mouth of a two kilometer valley, surrounded by densely forested hills on the other three sides. The sky above was thick with leviathans, the biggest swarm of which buzzed around the smoke plume to the North. They'd be dropping smoke jumpers and loads of fire retardant. Another steady stream of the helicopters headed east over the city of Santiago De Compostela, and Jack supposed the local air field was off in that direction.

His brigade stood in a rough circle waiting for orders, and a dozen other groups of orange jumpsuits were clustered throughout the clearing. It had taken them a full hour to come in from Vandenberg, which meant they were last to the party yet again. The whole summer had been that way.

Jack flipped through channels on his wristset until Logistics came up, opening a direct line to whoever was hosting the party. Then he tapped his headset and began transmitting. "San Jose Bravo Brigade present and requesting assignment."

A voice with a thick Spanish accent came back. "Roger that, San Jose Bravo. What's your specialty?"

"Wilderness search and rescue, and first aid. We have surgical personnel on hand."

"Hold. Report to Med Station Three for triage detail. Coordinates are as follows..." The voice rattled off a long string of numbers that Jack hardly paid attention to.

"Roger, over and out." He took a deep breath and clicked his headset off. The Bravos weren't going to like this. With any luck, they wouldn't shoot the messenger. "Good news, folks. We're on triage again."

"Again?" the lot of them asked in chorus.

“Come on, Jack. I didn’t join up to stick band-aids on boo-boos,” Leonid Nikitin said before jamming a cigar in his mouth. The man was pale and towered over the rest of the brigade like an old fashioned lighthouse. He had a point; he had extensive experience in tracking and wilderness survival, skills that were totally wasted at a triage station.

The same went for the rest, who all had first aid or first responder certs, but were specialists in other fields. All except for Dr. Lisa Albright who was a real bona-fide MD, but even she preferred to be in the bush. Jack couldn’t do anything about it, though. He’d tried before, and it was a lost cause.

“Cut me some damn slack, Nicotine. It’s hard work ignoring you all day. Hows about you complain to someone higher up the food chain, and let them ignore you for a change?”

Nikitin’s lip quivered until he couldn’t contain it any longer, and then he let out a huge belly laugh that flung his cigar to the grass. The rest laughed, too. That was a good sign. Tedious work was bad enough with a good attitude. With the wrong attitude, it could be torture.

From there on in, the Bravos were all business. They descended on the tent that was Med Station Three and didn’t so much relieve the exhausted Madrid Echoes as push them out of the way. They came up to speed in minutes and dug into the work of examining, sorting and usually treating the refugees who had fled the raging wildfire.

The bulk of their patients had cuts and scrapes, and few suffered anything worse than a touch of smoke inhalation and first degree burns. There were plenty of oxygen tanks on hand, and the Bravos were surprisingly good at putting pseudermal band-aids on boo-boos, so those patients moved through the system quickly. The fact that they had a physician meant they could also treat the few who required real care, instead of sending them on to the busy ICU tents or the city hospital three long clicks away.

By the time sunset rolled around, the Bravos were running on empty. Up above, the billowing clouds burned bright magma orange in the setting sun’s light, made starkly visible against the pallid and darkening sky. The raging fire stretching across the low hills could now be seen like a great glowing serpent, hungrily digesting the blackened trees within it. The crews couldn’t stop the fire, but word came through that they had contained it, and the remaining danger to the area was negligible.

The stream of patients finally thinned down to nothing around then. "Let's think about packing it in," Albright said.

Jack took a look at his watch and discovered it was coming up on 2100 hours local. They'd been working for ten straight hours, but the exhaustion didn't hit him until he did the math.

He tuned back to the logistics band, and was just about to make the call when a loud burp like a hail of automatic gunfire sounded from the hills. The initial burst was followed by a handful just like it, each weaker than the one before.

The weary corpsmen throughout the camp snapped to attention. "What the hell was that?" Nikitin barked. "Since when is this a combat zone?"

Jack switched back to the report channel and hurried messages from firefighters flooded his ear.

"...some type of small community. Musta missed it."

"...could be a weapons stockpile. Debris everywhere..."

"Survivors. Fifty, maybe a hundred. Hard to tell. Some badly injured. Send medevac."

"Barrier broken at section twelve. Need immediate air support. I repeat, need air support!"

Jack clicked the headset back off with a sigh. He didn't need to hear anymore. "Grab a fast bite and a cup o' joe, Bravos. More work on the way."

It didn't take long for leviathans laden with new refugees to return from the hills and start unloading. Men, women and children painted in a mixture of soot and ash stumbled out of the cargo bays, while the rest were carried out on stretchers. All three med stations, almost empty just moments before, now had more work than they could handle.

Injuries were more severe: third degree burns and the kind of wounds Jack had only seen near combat. Bullet holes from small and large caliber rounds, flesh shredded by flak, whole limbs missing in some cases. The orange jumpsuits were soon painted in an even coat of blood, making them hardly distinguishable from the patients in their care.

The work became a blur. There were no patients anymore, just wounds. Jack was applying a beige pseuderm bandage to a badly bleeding arm whose owner occasionally grunted from the pain. The patient was a tough customer just as they'd all been. Then Jack felt a tap at his shoulder and heard his name, and it snapped him out of the trance.

Standing behind him was young Skip Walters with concern all over his face, and behind Skip, a mother and daughter. The little girl's face was so dark with soot that her bright eyes seemed to glow, and even though her shoulder had a deep gash in it, she wasn't crying. She looked lost, and was shaking like a leaf in the cool night air.

"Jack, these people..."

"What!" Jack barked, in no way a question. He was tired. It was late. There was work to do, and his fuse was dangerously short.

Skip motioned to his upper arm, then pointed to the mother. "The tattoo. These people are separatists, Jack." He leaned closer and whispered conspiratorially, "Terrorists."

When the last word came out, Jack went on autopilot. His hands finished applying the bandage while he stared at Skip with cold eyes. "Nikitin, help the girl," he growled, and his fingers latched onto the new corpsman's collar.

He strode out of the tent dragging Walters stumbling behind him into the darkness. His pace quick, his skin on fire, Jack slammed Walters against a titanium supply crate and punched it hard with his free hand. The wall rang like a hammered gong. His grip moved from collar to throat.

"Remember this because I only tell you once. The Corps helps everyone the same. Everyone! If you ever hesitate to help anyone again... if I see you even think about it, I'll God damn kill you myself. Are we clear, Corpsman?"

"Yes sir," Skip croaked. His eyes were wide with fear. Both men's hearts were racing at full speed.

Jack took a deep breath. His grip loosened, and he straightened the young corpsman's collar. "Now get back in there and do your damn job."

Skip took off running with a fire under his heels, two parts fear and one part shame driving him. He wouldn't need to be told again. The kid would probably make it, Jack hoped, get with the program and fly right. Maybe even make a good corpsman some day. His first day had been a bad one, though.

Then Corpsman Jack Hernandez, knuckles bleeding and muscles burnt, turned and headed back into the massacre. San Jose Bravo Brigade worked long into the next day.

Chapter 3:

Snake Oil

The Global Aerospace Foundation's main campus was a huge complex covering two square kilometers outside of Bangalore, India. The architecture married gothic and high-tech, with great swooping roofs that gave the impression of the buildings themselves reaching for the distant stars. To Marcus Donovan, it was a modern day revival of renaissance cathedrals, pure pomp and self-importance, evoking the immeasurable vastness of space and by comparison, man's own insignificance. Other times, he just thought it was huge and ugly.

The main doors were on the eastern side, surrounded by a half-circle of stone columns arrayed as a sundial. They tracked the sun's daily and yearly journeys through the sky, a simple reminder of Earth's endless whirling journey through space.

Beyond that sat a sunken courtyard with a black memorial wall, inscribed with the name of every human being known to have perished in space exploration. The monument was inspired by the Vietnam Memorial still standing in old Washington DC, and oddly, both monuments were made of granite from the same Bangalore quarry less than ten kilometers away.

As usual, Marcus passed the wall without pausing, and promised himself he'd stop and read the names next time. It was always next time.

Leaning heavily on a metal cane, he limped past the wall, through the towering columns and headed straight for the automatic glass doors. He was thankful for that last detail. His tours in space were growing longer and more frequent, and that coupled with his natural aversion to exercise made every return to gravity more difficult—more painful—than the last. This time, he'd endured two weeks of physical therapy after touchdown, and his legs still felt like chewing gum in July. He wouldn't be walking at all without the cane, and normal everyday doors were more trouble than he cared for.

As he limped up to doors, the GAF emblem loomed above. It was a circular seal with shape that could have been a great red bird soaring to the stars. He wasn't sure, really. The design was terribly abstract, and the bird

could as easily have been a spaceship, a boomerang, or man's indomitable will to greatness. It was anyone's guess.

The foundation's motto was written in golden letters around the seal, reading "Ab terra, ad infinitum et ultrum." Marcus failed high school Latin, but he was pretty sure that meant, "From Earth, to infinity and beyond." He often wondered if a certain cartoon studio paid for the product placement, and that thought always put a smile on his face, no matter how onerous the task before him.

This time was different, though. Utterly unique. Usually, Marcus was there against his will, bureaucratically kidnapped in order to give seminars about his methods, or appear before this board or that committee to explain himself. Not this time. No, Marcus had a plan, and had pulled in favors from every corner of the Foundation for an opportunity to sit in on the Budget Oversight Committee's monthly meeting.

That didn't stop him groaning on his way in.

The interior was as unfriendly as the exterior, and largely empty as a final proof that its construction was all pretense without purpose. Marcus thought symbolic of the culture of waste that had crippled the Foundation for decades, and he ground his teeth while calculating how many exploratory missions could have been funded on the cathedral's budget. If he had his way, the Foundation's bureaucracy would be pared down to two dozen full time accountants who would meet once a week at an all-night diner, but he thought that dream a little far fetched, even for him.

The half-kilometer journey to the Goddard Meeting Hall was swift thanks to the network of moving pavement, or what he called the Great Conveyor Belts of Doom—he'd always had a flare for the dramatic—and he arrived early for a meeting for the first time in his life. The feeling was strange, maybe even a little refreshing, but nothing he intended to grow accustomed to.

He took a seat and somehow survived the next three hours, which were slow, tedious and boring in the extreme. One rotund bureaucrat after another stood at the head of the long table, pointed sweatily at ill conceived charts and graphs, and failed to describe in words what his diagrams failed to describe in pictures. The inability to come to a point must have figured highly on their resumé's, and Marcus stifled laughter when the thought occurred to him.

Once the last presentation was blessedly over—something about cost cutting measures in the office supply division—Marcus was up. It was show time.

He limped uneasily to the head of the table and tried to find some comfortable way to lean on his cane, and failing that, settled on leaning uncomfortably instead. His pose was not the absolute picture of masculinity, but it would have to do.

He reached into his pocket and removed a wireless drive that doubled as a remote control. With the click of a button, it interfaced with the rooms projectors, uploaded his presentation, and then sat in waiting for his next command.

“Gentlemen,” Marcus said and cleared his throat. “We’ve heard a lot today about cost-cutting measures: department re-organization, energy conservation, toilet paper recycling and what-have-you.” He paused to let the barb sting. “What none of these men told you is that they’re only offering band-aids that will, in all frankness, do nothing to stanch the Foundation’s financial bleeding. No amount of schedule shuffling can fix our problems.”

He took a look around at the blank faces surrounding him and then went on. “Those of you familiar with my work know that I operate a little differently. I’m not here to give you a lick and a promise. I care about results, and I know you do as well.”

The old codgers were awake, and Marcus had their attention. Technically, the difficult part of the job was already done.

He pressed a button on his remote; the room’s lights dimmed and the large screen behind him displayed an image of a bright, eye-shaped burst against a backdrop of stars.

“Twenty-five years ago, Sirius B went supernova and filled the night sky with a light that re-ignited mankind’s imagination. Interest in space exploration rocketed to levels not seen since the Cold War, as people all across the globe once again looked toward the heavens and wondered what secrets the universe might hold.”

He tapped the control and the screen now showed the Earth, its moon, and Mars.

“The Foundation was established and we quickly constructed more than two dozen permanent orbital facilities. Telescopes, the Midway Refueling station at Lagrange-Five, and the two greatest achievements of our time, the

Helios and Hyperion Solar Energy Arrays which made low-cost power a reality. We then went on to establish Tranquility Research Station on the moon, and Ares, the first permanent colony on Mars, which today supports more than seven thousand colonists.

“That list is just mind-boggling, isn’t it? That’s a hell of a lot to be proud of... But that’s all in the past. What about today? Well, as you all know, I’ve just returned from Copernicus Observatory, the only new off-world facility built in more than ten years. Think about that for a moment.

“Twenty years ago, the Global Aerospace Foundation was a media darling. We were the future, possessed of our own epic drive and determination, and working without rest toward a single goal: to press forth into the darkness and spread humanity to the far corners of the cosmos. My question is... what the hell happened?”

He clicked the remote again, and the planets were replaced by an artist’s rendering of the space elevator climbing up its tether into the void. That particular image was exceptionally famous, and had become a punch-line in the Foundation offices. In response, a rather predictable groan filled the air. “This is what happened, gentlemen. May I politely direct your attention to the elephant in the room.”

“The space elevator is our most ambitious project. It holds the promise of virtually eliminating the cost of orbiting payloads, and it could finally realize interplanetary travel on a massive scale. If we stop to consider the elevator’s potential, it’s a wonder we’ve accomplished so much without it.”

Another click of the remote, and the inspirational rendering was replaced with a photograph of a metal frame work, a skeleton of steel girders floating high above the Earth. A small maintenance crew was visible working at one end. “And here’s where the project stands today, more than six years past the planned completion date. The elevator has proven to be a logistical nightmare, and its failure has destroyed our momentum. Those bare girders... that’s where we throw all our money away.”

Marcus clicked again, and the display switched to a very simple diagram, one he hoped even bureaucrats could grasp. It was a green circle on a white background. He pointed to the image as he spoke. “This delicious apple pie represents all GAF expenditures since the project began.” Nine tenths of the circle turned red. “The cherry portion is all of the funding that’s been diverted to the elevator.” A fifth of that area then turned

blue. "...and the tiny little blueberry slice here was the original cost estimate."

"What, then?" Chief Administrator Chandra asked without a hint of amusement. "You're not seriously suggesting we cancel the space elevator?"

"Not at all, sir. I have a much more revolutionary idea: We finish it."

Marcus advanced to the next image. This one was an aerial photograph taken over Cape Canaveral launch center, where a monstrous rocket sat on the pad. "The single biggest obstacle is precisely what the elevator is designed to fix. Our inability to put its largest components into orbit has become a fiscal sink-hole. Even our largest multi-stage lifters aren't up to the task, and the components are too complex to be assembled in space. Essentially, we need the space elevator to finish the space elevator."

"We're chasing our own tail then," a droll voice at the far end of the table said.

"No, no... we're just attacking the problem from the wrong angle. Nobody wants to admit it, but we've run face first into a brick wall. We need more thrust and that requires more fuel, which in turn means larger, heavier and more sophisticated craft. Our answer has been to slap secondary rockets onto a lifter, and when those don't do the trick, we add support rockets to the secondaries. More components means more potential points of failure, and I don't need to remind anyone here the human price we've already paid for that failure.

"Maybe we could change public perception of atomic rockets, but I just don't see that happening anytime soon. That leaves one possible answer: a more energetic fuel source with a higher thrust to weight ratio."

The image changed again, now displaying a dense scattering of rocks against a field of stars. One rock was eerily out of place. It was a long cigar-shaped object with a strange black sheen and ripples along its length. "Gentlemen, I believe I have that fuel source. For the past year, my team has been investigating an anomaly we discovered in the Themis family of asteroids, which we've labeled Zebra-One. We couldn't figure out what Zebra-One was made of, but when we brought Copernicus on-line, we made a very interesting breakthrough. My associate, the esteemed Dr. Rao has determined that Zebra-One is in fact a solid mass of meta-stable metallic hydrogen, more than ten kilometers long, most likely separated from Jupiter by a prehistoric impact event.

“By conservative estimates, the thrust provided by metallic hydrogen would be more than three times greater than that of our current liquid fuel. This would not only answer our problems in constructing the elevator, but also provide a platform for further space exploration. And it’s just floating out there, ours for the taking.”

Marcus had struck a chord and he knew it. The entire committee was so deep in thought that he worried some had slipped into comas. It was more than a minute before Chandra spoke again. “I assume you’ve come here with a plan today, Dr. Donovan?”

Marcus always had a plan. He clicked his remote, and now the screen showed a shimmering metal space ship in orbital dry-dock. Its shape was blocky and strictly utilitarian, the surface bristling with dishes and antennae. “That’s correct, Chief Administrator. With the committee’s approval, I intend to repurpose the Shackleton Exploratory Vessel, which like most Foundation projects is over budget and behind schedule. My team is prepared to take up residence on board and finish construction, after which we’ll set course for Zebra-One and conduct initial survey and mining operations. We estimate the Shackleton should be capable of towing at least ten thousand tons of cargo back to Earth orbit.”

“And the Shackleton’s mission to the Galilean moons?”

Marcus turned off the projector, and the room’s lights came back on. “Postponed, sir. I’m sure everyone here would agree that the space elevator should be our first and only priority. The Galilean moons can wait until after mining efforts are fully under way.”

“Well... You’ve made a very compelling proposal, Dr. Donovan, and we thank you for coming today. The committee will deliberate and contact you with a decision.”

With nothing left to say, Marcus dipped his head and left the room. He was glad to be out; the silence inside was heavy, and he had no idea which way things would swing. He had to believe he’d done his best, and trust that his offer was too sweet to pass up. He also prayed that his reputation was enough to cement his place on the ship, otherwise there would be hell to pay. Of course, there’d be some hell to pay anyway.

As he stepped onto the Great Conveyor Belt of Doom, he began to feel the first twinge of regret. He wasn’t a dishonest person by nature, and this exercise amounted to deception on a scale he never imagined. There were

billions of credits riding on his manufactured data, and the sudden weight on his conscience was immense.

His only relief came when he thought of the hoodoo math that “proved” humans were, without any shred of doubt, alone in the universe. A dangerous dogma had risen from that math, and with any luck, he’d soon have the physical evidence necessary to bury it once and for all.

Chapter 4:

228 Days

Marcus Donovan's con worked. Less than a week later (3.3 picoseconds in bureaucratic time), the Budget Oversight Committee agreed to his plan and the Gypsies left on the first shuttle out.

They spent the next two months finishing and reconfiguring the 170 meter long Shackleton Explorer. The Io, Europa, Ganymede and Callisto probes were removed and placed in storage for some future Jupiter expedition, as was the bulky orbital scanning array, while seven modular cargo containers and a state-of-the-art extra-vehicular mission unit were installed in their place. The cargo holds were packed full of mining equipment and explosives which Marcus realized would have no use on the mission, but he couldn't figure out a way to ditch them without raising questions.

The Shackleton lost the planetary scanning equipment, but still retained its own substantial suite of sensors. The countless forward facing antennae made it look something like a harpoon for use against impossibly large whales. It also featured a pair of opposed habitation pods that jutted out from the main hull on their own stalks, which were designed to rotate around the central axis and supply the crew with more than half Earth gravity during the long voyage. What the Shackleton lacked in amenities, she made up for in advanced equipment. Mostly, anyway.

The interior of the Shackleton Explorer was a perfect match for her exterior, being both functional and inhumanly spartan. No plush seating, no Corinthian leather; only the bare essentials, and in some places slightly less. Marcus couldn't shake the thought that he would be hurtling through space in a tin-can lashed haphazardly to a nuclear reactor. He and his crew were about to become real space cowboys, riding out across the wild frontier.

Like the ship, Donovan's Gypsies were also reorganized. Most of his research staff made the transition: Sarah Park stayed on as sensor operator, and Mason Shen on communications, while Nils Jansen had no interest in leaving Earth orbit and found posting elsewhere. The grizzled and stoic Hector Pacheco continued as crew chief, but his work crews were entirely

purpose built, so the hands that assembled the ship were replaced with professional low-g miners before launch.

None of the Gypsies were qualified to operate a nuclear powered exploratory vessel, so it was necessary to comingle their ranks with the original Jupiter mission crew. Marcus was put in charge of the mission, but Commander Alex Faulkland remained in charge of ship's operations. Faulkland's team would be responsible for navigation, maneuvering, and the day-to-day maintenance of the nuclear drive systems, while Donovan's people would conduct the survey and mining.

For the first time in his career, Marcus wished the Foundation had a rigid rank structure with a clear chain of command. The current arrangement was too ambiguous for his liking, and he had no clue who would prevail if (or more likely when) a disagreement came about.

This feeling was made worse because he detected some hard feelings among Faulkland's crew, and he harbored no illusions about who they would side with. The ship's original mission would have set records for the most distant manned mission, and there was a lot of pride attached. Marcus just had to hope they were all professional who could adaptable to sudden changes in plans, because the one thing he knew for sure was that sudden changes were on their way.

The rest of The Shackleton's bunks were filled with Rao's research team, which included Dr. Juliette St. Martin, a former leading theoretical exobiologist who returned to medicine when the political climate got stormy, and Professor Harris Caldwell, who was brought on as a geologist officially, and as an archaeologist somewhat less officially.

With the ship completed and its crew assembled, The Shackleton Expedition left Earth orbit with little more fanfare than a "Good luck" from Bangalore, and then embarked on a wandering five month trek. Thrusters engaged and the Earth slowly shrank into the distance, until nothing was left around the ship but the sun and pin-prick stars. Weeks and sometimes months stretched out between the short thrusts that transferred the ship from one orbital trajectory to the next, during which time, the crew's only challenge was to fight boredom.

The battle was a fierce, but there were thankfully no casualties.

Then, after watching the same movies over and over until every line was memorized, after countless card games and late shifts making small

talk, a couple hundred long days after Marcus' plan was approved, they finally neared the fringes of the Themis family of asteroids.

Marcus and Commander Faulkland were in one of the habitation pod dining halls, which stretched the definition of "hall." It was a tight compartment just a smidgen bigger than any other on the ship. The men were seated on either side a metal table, where they were sipping reconstituted sludge from small plastic sacks. It was supposed to be coffee, but the resemblance was faint. Marcus had come to really enjoy that sludge, but it was an acquired taste.

He nudged the deck of magnetized playing cards on the table, which had been shuffled but otherwise ignored for hours, and Commander Faulkland waved him off.

"Couldn't focus on a game right now," Faulkland said.

That was the last thing Marcus expected to hear from the greying and hard-faced commander. "Way you tell stories, I figured you could play a hand of poker with your pants doused in burning napalm."

Faulkland chuckled and took a slurp of his black sludge. "It's not the mission. I've got a weird feeling. Something's not right."

Marcus felt a pang of guilt. He'd hardly felt them at all since they left Earth orbit, but now they were coming back with a vengeance. He decided it was finally time. "Listen... can I come clean about something?"

"I know ya been cheating at cards, Marc. Buy me a steak when we get back home, and I'll think nothing of it."

Why did everyone always think he was a cheater? "No, no... About the mission."

Just then, the intercom lit up and produced an F-sharp. "Commander needed on the bridge. We've arrived at Waypoint Lambda-Five."

"Roger that, bridge. On my way." He flashed a toothy smile at Marcus and said, "Showtime. Whatever you wanted to tell me can wait for later."

"Probably not," Marcus muttered, but the ship's commander was already through the door. Marcus had no choice but to follow.

The bridge was like the rest of the Shackleton, except another inch more spacious, and every surface covered with a dizzying array of switches, dials, readouts and other things Marcus had no business fiddling with. It was also the only part of the vessel with a view of the outside, which at that moment was filled with a vast field of asteroids looming in the dark.

Faulkland climbed into the captain's chair and strapped himself in. The rest of the bridge crew were already at their stations and fastened down with five point harnesses. "Take a seat, Doctor." The last word had a sarcastic sting to it, as it always did. "You don't want to be floating free during this."

The commander grabbed a black handset, pressed the button on its side, and in response, the F-sharp rang out again. As he spoke, his voice echoed through the halls. "Attention all crew and passengers. We are now preparing for final deceleration before entering the asteroid field. Find a suitable harness and strap yourself down, or you'll be in for an unpleasant ride."

Marcus clicked his belt, and then his eyes were filled with those asteroids. He picked through them trying to find his target, wondering if she might be visible from this distance, but it was no use. Zebra-One was still too far out to identify, if she was visible at all.

"Alright, that's long enough. Mr. Macek, bring us about one-eighty counter vector."

"Roger," Macek called back. As soon as the word was out of his mouth, the ship began to spin along its axis and the view of the asteroid belt ran from Marcus' hungry gaze. "Maneuver complete, Commander."

The commander tapped his personal display and scratched his beard, then looked up and said, "Sixty-percent thrust for 326 seconds, on my mark." The room was silent as a tomb while waiting for the command, and Marcus imagined the commander was stalling just for drama's sake.

"Mark!" Faulkland barked.

Then it began. The entirety of the Shackleton was filled with a roar as its engines magnetically accelerated ions into space. The sound was shocking at first, but it was so constant and pervasive that Marcus numbed to it quickly. He was reminded of a class field-trip to a hydro-electric dam in the fifth grade. He'd been impressed enough by the massive structure itself, but the trip took on legendary proportions when he stood beside the dam's thundering outlet. It was only then that Marcus began to understand some fraction of the billions of metric tonnes of water held on the other side, and the almost unimaginable force contained within.

Now he was in the depths of space, imagining that dam's immense strength at his back, straining against the Shackleton's momentum. He started to wonder how the ship's reactor compared to the dam, but abandoned the math. Better to enjoy the ride, he thought, and so he relaxed and stared out through the thick polycarbonate panes. He was pressed into

his seat with a force equal to Earth's gravity, and with a little effort of imagination, he was lying on the ground back home, watching the glittering night sky. During an earthquake. Next to a waterfall.

The engines' fearsome thrust lasted for just under six minutes, and then cut off as abruptly as it had begun. The sudden absence of noise left Marcus feeling hollow and reverent, like sitting in a church as the bells finished ringing.

The ship came back around and the windows were again filled with a field of charcoal black stones that stretched into the distance. They were closer now, close enough that the size of the asteroids could truly be appreciated. As Marcus stared on in amazement, he wondered how humbling that view might be to the architects of the Foundation's cathedral.

"Not very," he mumbled, only to realize he was talking to himself out loud.

Faulkland glanced over at him. "Come again, Doctor?"

Marcus looked a little sheepish. "Nothing, Commander. My internal monologue slipped out."

At the start of the voyage, a comment like that would have been followed by an uncomfortable silence, but Faulkland was accustomed to the Gypsies' eccentricities after five months together. He just nodded and said, "Understood. A view like this is liable to shake the best of us."

The commander took another moment to admire the view, then grabbed the intercom mouthpiece and announced that it was once again safe to move about the ship.

With the very talented Mr. Macek at the controls, The Shackleton slipped into the asteroid belt like a surgeon's scalpel, using only the lightest thrusts to carve a path to their objective. The passing asteroids grew to even more fantastic proportions as the ship progressed, many dwarfing the largest mountains on Earth.

Rao entered the bridge compartment quietly and found himself a spot next to Marcus. A glance at his face revealed a scientist in rapture, suddenly closer to the subject of his research than he'd ever thought possible. He was the first in his field to view these asteroids with the naked eye, and Marcus thought he could hear Rao's heart thumping madly in his chest.

Faulkland indulged the eager scientist and asked, "Would you care to tell us what we're looking at, Doctor Rao?"

“Of course.” Without skipping a beat, Rao moved closer to the windows and started pointing out features on the asteroids, the way a tour guide introduces animals in his zoo. “These are largely C-Type asteroids, composed of silicates, sulfides...”

Then, 228 days after Marcus made his presentation at the Foundation headquarters, after a half-hour of Rao’s excited lecturing on the composition of rocks, The Shackleton Expedition finally arrived at Zebra-One.

Chapter 5:

Contact

As the Shackleton Explorer approached its destination, there was nothing ahead of it but empty space. The atmosphere on the bridge had been peppered with excitement and discovery a moment before, but it was now thick with confusion.

Then the ship passed through... something. It was like a thin film or the surface of a liquid, and there was suddenly something massive out in front of them, so large that it filled the entire viewport and made all the nearby asteroids seem shrimpy by comparison. The object was long and thin like a cannon, and Marcus knew from his studies that it stretched more than thirteen kilometers from end-to-end, with a secondary structure attached to its hip that, while shorter, was still more than eight kilometers long.

Seen for the first time in person, the sheer scale of Zebra-One was confounding.

The air of discovery rushed back into the bridge, electrified with total astonishment. It was moments before anyone could muster the ability to speak.

Faulkland spoke first. He furrowed his brow, pursed his lips, and said, "Ms. Park, bring up the survey image of Zebra-One."

She looked to Marcus questioningly, and he nodded his assent. An instant later, the image Marcus had presented to the GAF was floating above the holographic projector at the front of the bridge, right beside the viewport where the real thing could be seen. The image showed an object of the right dimensions, but with a glistening exterior that was black like obsidian, and ringed by a series of vertical ridges. The real Zebra-One was entirely different, a greenish shimmering iridescent surface half caked in a layer of sediment, and bristling with tiny spires that evoked Roman architecture and insect anatomy all at once.

Faulkland looked back and forth between the reality outside the window and the holographic fake. On his face, Marcus recognized the look of a man who had just been cheated at cards. "Doctor Donovan. You wanted to come clean about something."

"I did, Commander."

The beleaguered commander ran a hand through his greasy hair, past veins that were starting to throb on his forehead. “Now would be the time. What in hell am I looking at?”

Marcus unbuckled himself and floated out to the front of the bridge, taking up station beside the projection. “Park, please bring up the original.”

The image of his fictional asteroid was replaced with the final scan from Copernicus. “Commander, this is Zebra-One, an artifact of unknown origin which my team and I have been researching for the past seven years. We haven’t been able to determine what she is exactly, but I suspect she’s not from our neck of the woods.”

Rao, awkward and nervous, said, “Wait, it’s not metallic hydrogen? I must have been mistaken.” It was half-way between a weak lie and a bad joke.

A growl rumbled deep in Faulkland’s throat. “I don’t appreciate being lied to, Donovan. You’re telling me this is what? Some kind of alien craft?”

“Maybe, or maybe the alien itself. We couldn’t be sure from Earth, which is why we’re here.”

Faulkland’s arms were crossed, and he was staring straight through the massive artifact. His breathing was slow and methodical. “They never would have approved that mission,” he finally said. “The windbags would’ve destroyed your data, and you along with it. Made sure you couldn’t get a job teaching grade school science in Siberia. You’re a real son of a bitch, Donovan.”

“Thanks... I think.”

Faulkland unbuckled his harness and pushed off into the middle of the bridge, his eyes fastened on the strange object. “I know I should be furious right now, but man alive, this is really something. Something wonderful.”

Marcus drifted over to meet him, and then turned and pointed out at Zebra-One. His pose mimicked every painting of an explorer discovering a lost city. “A promise just waiting to be fulfilled. Besides, where would you prefer to find your name in the history books, Commander? By a manned mission to Jupiter, or first contact with extra-terrestrial life?”

“Yeah,” was all Faulkland said. Then he woke from his stupor. “Shen, prepare a status update for Bangalore. Tell them that we’ve arrived at Zebra-One and will begin initial survey within the hour.” He gave Marcus a knowing nod.

“That might be a problem, sir,” Mason Shen said in consternation. He was working furiously at his station. “I’ve lost contact with Earth, sir.”

“Solar flare?” Faulkland asked.

“No, sir. The forecast is spotless, and radiation is within tolerance. Signal just went dead about five minutes ago, and I haven’t picked up a thing since. I’m still receiving a carrier signal from Mars, though.”

“Strange. Probably nothing. Relay through Mars until we can re-establish contact.”

“Aye aye.”

Faulkland turned back to Marcus. “What now, Doctor?”

Marcus had years worth of plans ready to unfold. “This is our first glance up her skirt, and I’d like to make a few passes along the length of her. Get the lay of the land. With any luck, we might get some insight into how her camouflage works. After that, we go out to meet her in person. Rao’s team identified a number of structures we call irises, which they suspect are air-locks, or else some kind of unknown organ. Either way, our investigations should start there. Iris Charlie on the starboard side of the main hull appears to be the most accessible.”

“How many times have you rehearsed that speech?”

“Thousands,” Marcus replied. Then he noticed something about Faulkland’s demeanor that he couldn’t immediately put into words. “You’re coming along,” he said incredulously.

Faulkland had a smile as wide as the stars. “Wild horses couldn’t stop me.”

“Isn’t that kind of reckless?”

“If we weren’t a little reckless, Marcus, we wouldn’t be space cowboys.”

Marcus Donovan reflected on that and decided that truer words had never been spoken.

Copernicus Observatory was dark. Its generator was off-line for routine maintenance, and during this part of the station’s orbit, the sun was completely hidden behind the Earth, leaving the distant stars the only remaining source of light.

Nils Jansen was floating around near the main power console, idly looking over a wiring diagram with a flashlight. He was wearing most of a skin-tight pressure suit, all except for the helmet which was still dangling

from his hip. The station was reasonably comfortable, and he could hardly stand to wear the stuffy thing. It made him feel claustrophobic, and he likely wouldn't put it on until air inside the station began to taste foul.

Other than Jansen, the spherical control center was completely deserted. He was part of a three-man skeleton crew who kept things in order while Bangalore controlled the scanning array from the ground. Research teams occasionally came through on short tours, but in the mean time, Jansen and the other two technicians kept the seats warm, made sure the place didn't fall apart, and tried not to kill one another.

It wasn't Jansen's dream job, but the salary was alright, it was easy work, and he accrued enough leave to visit his family every few months.

It could be worse, he assured himself. He could be hurtling through space on some fool alien hunt.

He flicked his headset on. "Marco?"

There was another moment of silence, then his earpiece crackled to life. "Polo."

Jansen groaned. "When are you gonna give up that lame, tired ass joke?"

"About ten seconds after you start addressing me properly."

"Fine," he said. "Technician Jansen to Technician Esquivel: Are you done yet? I wanna turn the power back on. Over."

"Nope. Two blown fuses at Junction D7. I just sent Hopkins off to get replacements."

Jansen looked down at the crinkly wiring diagram and found Junction D7, then started looking for the nearest storage locker. He found it a hundred meters away. "You sent Hop? He'll take a week."

"He's getting faster," Marco said hopefully.

Jansen shook his head. "No, he's not."

"Just let me pretend."

"You guys realize I can hear you, right?" Hopkins asked.

Jansen folded his wiring diagram back up and tucked it into a pouch. "Do me a favor and hurry up, would ya? I'm missing a Jefferson's marathon."

"And the whole world wept," Marco said caustically. "Over and out."

Jansen covered his microphone. "Dolt wouldn't know quality TV if it bit him on the ass." A moment later, he began to twiddle his thumbs, hoping

that the pressure suit's thick gloves might make the task more challenging. He was sorely disappointed.

Then Nils Jansen heard a noise like none he'd ever heard before. It was so strange that he couldn't even begin to describe it. So strange that he began to wonder if it was a noise at all, or if he was suffering some kind of hallucination. He was pretty sure "space madness" was only an urban legend, but he sometimes had his doubts. This was one of those times.

"Guys, there's something weird going on out here," Hopkins' ever-pitiful voice squeaked, huffing and puffing between words.

Not a hallucination, Jansen decided. "What is it?"

The response came back fast. "I don't friggin know, Nils. If I knew, don't you think I would've said something more descriptive than something weird? Jesus."

"Jansen, I'm in an access tube right now. Can you see what he's blubbering about?"

Jansen was already moving around to a better vantage point. "Which direction, Hop?"

"Heading... I dunno. Just look towards the moon."

He wheeled around and there it was, whatever it was. There was a slight shimmering in empty space, like photos he'd seen of the aurora, but the pattern was all wrong. It reminded him of the house he grew up in, when the late summer sun would reflect off the pool, leaving undulating patterns on the screen door and the ceiling.

"Do you see it, Jansen?"

He was dumbfounded.

"Jansen?"

He snapped back to attention. "Yeah, I see it. I don't know what the hell it is, either."

He stared at the undulating field of light, slack-jawed, while colors played across it in every shade of the rainbow. In another moment, he was sure that it wasn't just one field of light, but seven spaced out evenly.

Then solid shapes began to emerge from within. The lights stretched around them, clinging like latex, until they were whole and complete. The light shimmered and faded away, revealing seven jagged discs like nothing Jansen had ever seen before. There was a lot of that going around.

"You see 'em, Hop?" He asked.

"Sure do. They look like... like bone or something."

“See what?” Marco demanded.

Jansen ignored him. “Oyster shell.”

“No, more like coral,” Hopkins said.

Hopkins was right. The texture of the discs was remarkably like coral in a fantastic shade of royal blue. Jansen had no idea what that meant, or if it meant anything at all. As he floated there against the window with his mouth gaping open, he tried to find some frame of reference to gauge how big the discs were, but to no avail. He suddenly wished he’d paid more attention in his astronomy courses. Like Hopkins had. “What do you think? Five kilometers across?”

The line was dead for a moment. “Bigger. Ten, maybe twenty. It’s hard to tell.”

“You guys aren’t making any damn sense,” Marco said bitterly. “Would someone please tell me what’s going on? Use words and sentences.”

For a single pregnant moment, the discs sat there motionless, and Jansen had a feeling they were examining the Earth. They were considering their next move. Then they burst into motion, accelerating at a rate Jansen never would’ve believed if he hadn’t seen it with his own eyes. They scattered around the globe.

“Maybe they’re trying to make contact,” Hopkins said. The tone of his voice said he didn’t believe it either.

There was a burst of light in the distance. An explosion. The Sunyaev Observatory was out that way. Another light flashed, this time from the direction of the Brahe Array. A half dozen more explosions appeared in the following seconds. It was the first depressing fireworks show Jansen had ever seen.

“Marco,” Jansen finally said into an already dead communicator, “we’ve got company, and I don’t think they brought pie.”

Chapter 6:

The Earth Stands Still

The sky was dull grey, and rain was trying to fall in fits and starts. It wasn't a storm yet, but the promise of something dreadful hid within the water fat clouds. Jack Hernandez wasn't pleased. The last thing he wanted to see on returning from hurricane-ravaged Jacksonville was more rain. He'd been hip-deep in flood waters for so long he could scarcely remember what dry underwear felt like, and he spent the entire flight home dreaming about the warm San Jose sun. His plan was to do nothing but dry out for two straight days.

The sun, that cowardly bastard, was nowhere to be found.

Jack's train ride was quiet and fast, followed by an energetic if mechanical march back from the station and a quick trot up to the door. The apartment unlocked itself as he approached, and he was already half-stripped when the door closed behind him. He tossed his backpack aside, unzipped his jumpsuit and let it hang limply from his waist, drew his tank-top over his head and threw it to the floor. Hopping, he yanked off one boot and then the other, stepped out of the jumpsuit and left it in a damp heap. In another moment, his sponge-like boxers and socks were gone, and he collapsed on the living room carpet naked.

The air in his apartment was cool and—to Jack's great satisfaction—bone dry. Without the television on, the room was silent save for the sound of his breathing and the intermittent patter of rain on the patio. It didn't quite measure up to his sun-soaked dreams, but it would do. He lost track of time lying there on the floor, staring at the ceiling and listening to a world momentarily at peace.

When his phone began to ring, he was adamant about not answering it. Just let it go, he told himself. It can't be anything important. The answering machine will get it. The second ring came and went, the third followed close behind. By the fourth, he was starting to reconsider. Before the fifth ring came, he was on his feet and moving.

He plucked the handset from its cradle. "Hello?"

"Hey Jack," a sultry sweet voice came back. "You were supposed to call when you landed, dopefish."

“Sorry, Jess. I was so tired, I came straight home and passed out.” That was close enough to the truth.

“Good news, then. I’m on my way over with an armload of groceries. I’m cooking you dinner tonight.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“How about because I miss you, silly?”

Jack smiled, and for a second his thoughts wandered to the ring nestled in its delicate little box at the bottom of his sock drawer. “Good reason. How far away are you?”

“Five minutes,” she guessed.

“That doesn’t give me much time to get dressed.”

“Whatever you’re wearing is fine,” Jess said. “See you in a bit.” Then dial-tone.

Jack dropped the phone back into its cradle and saw the message light blinking. It couldn’t be good news. It was never good news, but he hit play anyway.

“Don’t suppose you recognize my voice, do you? It’s your mother. Maybe I should adopt the answering machine; at least it picks up the phone when I call. Anyway, just letting you know Charlie got promoted to Staff Sergeant. Isn’t that great? I know you don’t like what he does, but you should talk to him. He worked so hard, and... He’d never say it, but he still looks up to you. He only joined up with Carbon Corp because he wanted to help people like you do. He’s starting his third tour, Egypt this time, and I’d really appreciate if you at least gave him a call before he ships out. I guess that’s it. Hope you and Jess can join us for Thanksgiving. Love you, and call me sometime.”

It never ceased to amaze Jack how much guilt that woman could cram into a one minute recording. He also realized, with heavy heart, that she’d never understand the rift between her sons. When Jack joined the ERC, he dedicated himself to helping people any way he could, regardless of race, religion or politics. He risked life and limb for strangers every day, and it just wasn’t the kind of work a person could do without believing in the cause. He was a true believer, through and through.

Then Charlie made the most Charlie-like decision possible: he became a damned mercenary with Carbon Corporation. He wasn’t helping people; he was putting bleeding holes in them and blowing them to bits.

This was nothing new. Charlie always made messes that Jack had to clean up, and now their childhood was repeating itself, but inflated to a global scale. This was the culmination of a pattern, the last step in making sure everything Jack did was ultimately meaningless.

After a moment of reflection, Jack suspected that was a tad melodramatic.

They didn't see one another much anymore, and whenever they did, Jack conveniently forgot he was a pacifist. There were black eyes, split lips and cracked ribs on both sides, and they finally decided that avoidance was the only sensible answer. It turned out to be a great policy, and they hadn't spoken in two years. Two wondrous, blissful years.

As Jack stood by the phone, mulling over his little brother killing dissidents in Egypt, he heard the door open and all of the anger and frustration melted away.

In a few long strides, he crossed the floor and intercepted Jess in the open doorway. His arms encircled her, his hands pressed into the small of her back, his head craned down and he gently pressed his mouth to her soft lips. The bag of groceries between them dropped to the floor.

After a moment, he pulled away and looked into her brilliant blue eyes, but stayed so close he could feel her warm breath breaking against his upper lip. "I missed you, too," he whispered.

"I noticed," she said with a grin. "You're naked."

"You said whatever I'm wearing is fine. You, on the other hand, are way over-dressed." He stole another kiss. "And so beautiful."

Before Jess could reply, Jack's arms cinched around her waist and lifted her up, then he spun her around. She filled the room with laughter, and he attacked her open mouth, hungrily kissing and nibbling at her lower lip.

He lowered her back to the floor with one arm and closed the door with the other.

"Dinner?" She asked.

He ducked his head under her chin and laid one kiss and another on the tender skin of her throat, all the while inhaling her sweet honeysuckle scent. "Dessert," he suggested.

Then the moment was ruined. The datapad in his backpack blared out an alert, but Jack was adamant about not answering it. Just let it go, he told himself. It can't be anything important. He froze in place, savoring the feeling of her warm body against his. The second alert came and went, the

third followed close behind. The fourth began, but he wouldn't let himself reconsider. Before the fifth ring came, Jess made up his mind for him.

"You have to answer it," she said.

He reached into the pack, retrieved his pad and looked grimly at the screen. "It's Priority One," he said.

"What's that?"

"Well, I've been with the Corps for nine years, and I've never seen anything worse than Priority Two."

He flashed back to orientation and heard his instructor's voice listing Priority One scenarios. "Nuclear strike, nerve or chemical agent, epidemic, asteroid impact."

Jack gestured at the TV and it came on, but the black screen said, "No Signal."

"Damn storm."

"You should go," Jess said with two tons of regret in her voice.

"Nuclear strike, nerve or chemical agent, epidemic, asteroid impact," his instructor droned on.

"I'm so sorry," Jack said. "I have to go."

"I know. It's why I love you, Corpsman Hernandez. You're out to save the world, and someday, you're going to."

"Nuclear strike, nerve or chemical agent, epidemic, asteroid impact," the old voice was now chanting.

"There's something I need to ask you when I get back. You'll be here?"

She smiled and kissed him, and there was a tension that hadn't been there a moment before. "Yes," she whispered in his ear, "I'll always be here waiting for you, until the stars rain down from the sky."

And he knew she would.

On autopilot, Jack dressed in fresh clothes, checked his gear and flew out the door. He ran to the train station and caught the mag-lev down to Vandenberg, totally oblivious to everything around him. He didn't notice everyone in the station fiddling with their malfunctioning phones, or gossiping about blank televisions. He missed the announcement that the train was being guided manually in the absence of the traffic network, and he didn't even notice that his GPS was blank.

Jack didn't notice because he was thinking about that question he would ask when he got back. During the trip, he didn't once hear his instructor's voice and the list of possible calamities. All he heard, over and over again,

was Jess' promise to wait for him, in that voice that was too sweet for words.

Chapter 7:

Broken Bird

The Vandenberg airfield was in a panic the likes of which Jack had never seen before. Preflight personnel were rushing everywhere, assembling equipment at a break-neck pace and prepping the massive tranzat carriers at all five gantries. Each spear-like tranzat was flanked by ten of the orange leviathan helicopters, lined up in rows with their blades folded, and waiting to be loaded. The helicopters looked like nothing so much as oversized Easter eggs painted by a strangely unimaginative kid.

The Priority One alert had gone out to everyone: primary squads, secondaries and reserves alike. That added up to about five thousand drop-ready corpsmen lined-up in rows on the tarmac, waiting to be briefed, loaded and launched.

Vandenberg was California's primary launch site. More volunteers would be arriving at secondary sites by the thousands, and the same would be happening at ERC launch facilities all over the globe. The amount of manpower in motion was staggering to consider.

Jack found the SJ Bravos among the sea of orange jumpsuits without too much effort, and he fell into formation. "Hey Albright, any idea what's up?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

He scanned the group and took a mental picture. He'd never seen five thousand completely dumbfounded faces before, and he doubted he ever would again.

The regional director came out a few minutes later and cleared his throat over the PA. "Settle down, corpsmen," he said, and the chatter died. "I know you're all wondering what the hell's going on, and you're not alone. There seems to be a perfect shit storm coming down right now, and we're working double time just to put the big picture together.

"First off, as you no doubt noticed, communication networks are down right now. All of them. This is due to some sort of broad spectrum interference that's wreaking havoc with anything wireless. We haven't identified the source yet, but we believe the effect to be global.

“It’s a small miracle that we managed to get the alert out at all. Of course, I know all you dedicated boys and girls would’ve followed regs and reported in during a communications black-out, anyway.”

There was stifled laughter in the crowd.

“But that’s not Priority One.” The director took a moment to clear his throat. “Shortly before communications were interrupted, two impacts were reported on the Asian subcontinent, one in India and the other in China. The events registered on our seismic equipment, and we’ve estimated the power of each to be in the five gigaton range.”

Jack and five thousand other corpsman cursed.

“We initially believed the impacts to be asteroids. However, the evidence we’ve pieced together points to the Helios and Hyperion solar arrays being the culprits. We have no idea why they fell out of orbit, but we can assume the destruction is... simply unimaginable.

“Both impacts occurred in high density population centers, in fact, the most densely populated regions in the world. Considering the coincident failure of communications networks, we must assume that this constitutes some form of attack. Terrorism cannot be ruled out, although it’s hard to imagine a terrorist organization with the resources and coordination necessary for this type of operation.

“Our job, as always, is to provide humanitarian aid. We’ll be double and triple loading laviathans, and cluster dropping at full speed from LEO in order to get as many feet on the ground as possible. Your primary jobs will be to collect refugees and organize temporary camps, then hold tight until we can begin airlifting them to wherever the hell we can. Expect to see local military, as well as Blade and Carbon forces in the area.”

The director took a moment to think back through the speech, making sure he didn’t leave anything out. Then he said, “You know the rest. Let’s get in the air.”

From there, it was a normal launch but with more bodies and none of the banter. The Bravos loaded into their leviathan accompanied by a reserve squad and two full pallets loaded with medical supplies, rations and light-weight collapsible shelters. Everything and everyone was locked down, and then the leviathan and nine identical replicas were lifted into the tranzat’s cradles and locked into place.

With the windows covered, the rest of the launch process always happened blind. There was the feeling of being moved in one direction and

then another, the ratcheting of the launch gantry as the plane was angled upwards, and then a roar and immense pressure as the tranzat thrust itself into the sky. The roar subsided, and for the rest of the trip, they swayed and bobbed like an inflatable dolphin in a pool.

This time, Leonid Nikitin was wide awake and Lisa Albright's earphones were nowhere to be found. Each of the passengers was wearing the same blank expression found in hospital waiting rooms, with eyes cast down and brows drawn together. Most were liping something, and Jack assumed they were prayers. When he noticed his own lips were doing the same, he couldn't recall what they'd been reciting.

The tranzat blasted through the upper atmosphere for an hour, and the corpsmen sat in silence waiting for the drop. Then they heard a strange howl and the cabin rocked hard to the side.

"Tell me that's just turbulence, Jack," Skip shouted across the isle.

Several more howls rushed past the hull, and another one struck. The cabin rattled and shook. Jack could only think of one possible answer: they were under attack. "Masks!" He cried out, and everyone reacted instantly, grabbing their oxygen masks from the packs above and pulling them over their heads.

Another howling thing struck the ship, and their leviathan lurched free of its cradle, dropping into the thin air at the upper edge of the atmosphere. No warning light this time, just the sickly feeling of plummeting like a stone, tumbling end over end.

The portholes on either side of the cabin revealed the Earth, the dark sky, and the Earth again, chasing one after the other in rapid succession. The burning tranzat shrank into the distance, and the air was thick with strange shapes that Jack couldn't make out.

Another series of howling rounds screamed past the hull, and one struck with a deafening crack. In response, the safety windows exploded in a rain of small pellets, and the air pressure inside the leviathan disappeared.

They were falling, unguided, uncontrolled. Jack had a hunch and he had to act quickly or it'd all be over. He tugged the climbing hook out from his harness, latched it to the U-shaped restraint, and slammed the seat's emergency release. The metal bar jerked up and away from him, but before he could fly loose in the spinning cabin, he tensed and pushed himself hard toward the cockpit door.

He flew through the air while the cabin twisted around him, only to crash into his target a thump. His bones rattled and his body ached from head to toe, but he grappled at the guidebars and managed to grab hold. With a tap at his harness, the hook released and he retrieved the spring loaded arrestor cable, then latched up at his new position.

His gloved hands fumbled at the door handle then pried it open with a twist, revealing the shattered cockpit beyond. He clambered through and found precisely what he feared: a destroyed windshield and two dead pilots strapped into the seats.

The next few moments were a blur of motion. He released the pilot's belt, pulled the limp body free and climbed in to replace him. It took him a second to focus, to blot out the spinning Earth and make sense of the instrument panel in front of him. Jack was rated a Class C leviathan pilot, and this was hardly second nature to him, but he wanted to live. He would focus and he would remember.

He closed his eyes, imagined the diagrams and tried to hear his flight instructor's commands. Reaching out, unsure if he was grabbing the right lever, he pushed one all the way forward and the leviathan's air-baffles extended. They increased drag at the top of the craft and righted it as it fell.

The helicopter wasn't tumbling anymore, but the altimeter was still spinning like a buzzsaw blade, and the air speed had too many digits for Jack's taste. The speed was dropping, but not fast enough. , The rotors would shear off if he tried to extend them, destroying any chance of a controlled landing. He needed to drop a lot of weight and fast.

He flipped the cargo panel open and punched the door release, then looked back over his shoulder and watched the ramp lurch down. At half-way open, he activated the cargo ejectors and watched the two heavy pallets tumble out into the sky, where their parachutes popped and gently lowered them to the Earth.

"At least they'll make it," he mumbled into his mask.

With the pallets gone, the Leviathan's descent slowed down to something reasonable, and Jack breathed a sigh of relief. He leaned forward and slapped the EXTEND button, but nothing happened. He slapped it again without response. A blinking light higher up the console caught his eye, and it didn't take an expert to realize what "JAM" meant. It meant he was screwed.

Why would it be jammed? He burned through options. The cover could be damaged, or the rotor destroyed completely. There was no hope in either line of thought. No possibility of recovery, so he abandoned them. Power cables could've been severed, but that would have a warning light. He was missing something. Then he remembered: the rotors wouldn't extend without the engines running.

Jack moved the throttle and listened for an engine response, but it was impossible to hear anything over the thousand kilometer-per-hour winds whipping through the craft. There should be a STALL light somewhere, but he couldn't remember where, and there was no time to look for it.

With the furious Earth rushing up at him, the only thing Jack could think of was the auto-rotate procedure, and it would have to do. His hands flew across the controls, flipping switches that disengaged the transmission and overrode safety protocols. Paying no mind to the hundreds of lights blinking across the console, he once again reached forward and mashed the EXTEND button. The blades unfolded and began to spin.

The leviathan wouldn't travel far without power, but the rotating blades would make an effective parachute, and even offer minimal steering. The only thing left to do was bring his bird down to the ground.

Jack finally looked around and got his bearings, and it didn't look good. There was no trace of the other leviathans or the tranzat, and God only knew how far he'd traveled before getting things under control. The air above was thick with those strange vehicles, now too distant to see clearly, while below there was only a thick dust cloud that stretched to the far horizon.

The barely stable leviathan dipped down into the dust cloud, and once inside, vicious winds tore at it from every direction. Jack held onto the controls tightly, and as he dropped into the darkness, he prayed that he'd seen the worst of this day.

Chapter 8:

Jonah and the Great Fish

Rumours spread through the Shackleton like a plague, and the crew were up to speed within an hour. They had found an alien vessel. What followed was overwhelming excitement and fifty-six astronauts trying against all odds to squeeze into an eight-man bridge compartment. Still, the Shackleton did nothing the first day but survey, traveling up and down the length of Zebra-One like a mosquito buzzing around a buffalo, scanning, observing and recording every strange feature of the artifact's surface. Each new discovery elicited bursts of conjecture and heated debate.

Faulkland eventually banished the crowd from the bridge, but they wouldn't be deterred. Instead, the lot of them crammed into the maximum-occupancy-twelve dining hall where they monitored progress by CC-TV and somehow managed not to suffocate.

It was a long day mapping Zebra-One's surface, and at its end, Marcus didn't sleep at all, nor did he bother trying. He knew from experience that he would have lain awake, running every possibility and contingency through his head. Commander Faulkland claimed that he could sleep at will anywhere in the universe, but he spent the whole night on the bridge with Marcus, staring in perfect silence at the sleeping giant just outside their window.

Meanwhile, Mason Shen sat off to the side and tried to solve the communication puzzle. When morning hours rolled around, he was still at his console and no closer to an answer. He was in contact with Ares Colony on Mars, but Earth remained morbidly silent for them as well.

"I'm about ready to give up," Mason said around 0800.

Marcus was still staring at Zebra-One, now with dry and sore eyes. He asked the obvious question. "Still no luck, Mason?"

"I wouldn't say none," Mason replied. "I've been chatting with this Martian comm operator, and she sounds pretty cute. Earth, though... Boss, if I didn't know better, I'd think everybody just packed up and moved away. There's nothing."

Marcus felt like that should bother him more, but he was so far away that it didn't matter. "No worries. I'm sure there's a simple answer."

“Yeah,” was all Mason said, his voice lacking enthusiasm.

“Have there been any signals from Zebra-One?” Marcus asked, switching back to the important topic.

“Not a peep, sir. I’ve been cycling greetings in every language I know and some I don’t, but she’s just as quiet as the Earth. If she’s awake, she ain’t talking.”

“Just as well,” Faulkland said. “It’d be a little anti-climactic if she called us back.”

By 0915, two teams of eight were assembled, briefed and ready to get on with the show. Marcus’ team included himself, Commander Faulkland, Dr. St. Martin, and a handful of the eager miners. The second team was Rao’s, and included Crew Chief Hector Pacheco, the paleontologist Professor Caldwell, and their own team of miners. As much as Marcus pretended there was some deep strategy to the team rosters, they were actually divvied up based on personality. He knew who got on well with whom, and he preferred his teams not be at each other’s throats until after a mission started.

Like Marcus, hardly anyone slept the night before, and they were running on a mixture of high octane coffee and lipid bars. Combining stimulants and sleep deprivation never added up to a level head, and Marcus had a sneaking suspicion that most exploration had begun in a similar fashion. It would explain why so few natives survived first contact.

He was about to say a prayer for whatever natives they might encounter, when he realized his own people were completely unarmed. The tone of his prayer changed very quickly.

With the Shackleton stationed fifty meters from Iris Charlie, the exploratory teams entered the EVA module, which housed a dressing room and airlock. The pressure suits were skin tight, as close as a human could get to naked in space, and the only clothes worn beneath were thin thermals that left little to the imagination.

It took the team less than ten minutes to suit up. Then, with everyone helmeted, sealed, checked and double-checked, they entered the airlock. The heavy door closed behind them and the lights switched from green to red: depressurization was under way. At the same time, a digital gauge on the wall began to tick down from 101 kilopascals. The process was never speedy, but with history awaiting them on the other side, it was glacially slow.

When the gauge read zero, the round outer door popped inward, rolled to the side and revealed the vast iridescent wall of Zebra-One, so large that Marcus was struck by vertigo as if he were hanging fifty meters above the ground.

His discomfort must have been apparent because he felt a hand on his shoulder, and heard Faulkland's voice in his ear. "Everything alright, Doctor Donovan?"

"Fine," he said as he regained his composure. "Just haven't gone EVA in a while." That wasn't true. "Donovan to Base, we're exiting the bay now."

"Roger that, Donovan. Good luck."

The pressure suit read his body-language and engaged its cold-jets, thrusting him out away from the Shackleton. The other astronauts followed and together they slowly drifted out of the chamber and into the void, while one of the ship's life-rafts automatically detached and moved to intercept them. Once they were all hooked up to the raft, its own engines lit up and carried them over the last leg of the journey.

As he approached, Marcus formed different theories about the ship's surface. He'd long believed it to be some sort of metal, but at fifty meters, he started to entertain the idea of a metamorphic silicate shell. Ten meters after that, the translucency became more pronounced like quartz. Yet another ten meters on, he began to notice patterns swirling within the surface, like viscous fluid in a clear casing. In the final stretch, he finally admitted that he had no damn idea what it was.

The life-raft came to a halt just a short distance from Zebra-One's hull, and Marcus couldn't unhook himself fast enough. While the rest of the team were still detaching their umbilical cables, he was free and floating towards her. Finally, after all those long years, he was there beside her. He knew it was reckless, but it didn't matter. He had to touch her.

The color of the wall shifted as he approached, so slightly he thought it was just his imagination. The surface was flawless, without seams, panels, scratches or any other imperfection. During the survey, his team had detected geometric surface patterns—grooves and protrusions both—but on a large scale separated by hundreds of meters. They assumed they'd find similar patterns on the small scale, but there were no such details, no signs of anything mechanical nor any hint of the artifact's manufacture. For as far

as Marcus could see, it was simply a wall of clear glass with subtly swirling colors trapped beneath.

His thrusters brought him to a graceful stop mere inches away from her, and he reached out. Without any jitter or hesitation, his hand rose up with his fingers spread, and he touched the unimaginably large creature in front of him, the way a diver might dare to touch a passing whale.

Nothing happened.

He wasn't sure what he expected. He didn't know if his hand would sink in or be repelled, or if she might crumble at his touch like a mummy rashly exposed to fresh air. He half expected to wake up back home in bed, covered in sweat, with only a vague recollection of his strange adventure. Instead, there was no response other than the feeling of his gloved hand against something solid. And with that, he was satisfied.

"How's she feel, Marc?" Rao's voice crackled over the radio.

"Real," he said. He looked at the wall directly in front of his face, and now he was sure it had changed. On their approach, Zebra-One had been the same dull yellow-green she'd been throughout the previous day's survey. Now, the wall in front of him had become a vibrant, living green. It was the green of fertile hills after spring's first rain. And there was something else.

"The color of the wall is changing, Doctor," Faulkland said.

"Yeah, think you're right," Marcus replied, while something even stranger had caught his attention. Around his hand, there was a flickering pattern that branched out from his finger tips. He waved the hand back and forth, and the pattern followed, pulsing and waving, slowly growing in strength. It reminded him of the chintzy plasma globe he used to keep on his desk. "Now that's interesting."

"What?" Rao asked.

"I'm not sure. Galvanic skin response maybe. One way or another, she's reacting to me."

The rest of the crew were finally unhooked from the life-raft, and Rao came up beside him. As he approached, the rich green colored area expanded to surround him as well. He reached out his hand toward the wall and lightning-like patterns appeared around his fingers, their ends disappearing into the mysterious depths of the alien material.

"Surface temperature is rising," Juliette St. Martin said with a little worry in her voice. Marcus turned to look over his shoulder, and found her

behind him with a multifunction probe in her hand. The pen-like piece of metal was attached to her wrist by a thin cable, through which it transmitted information to her heads-up-display.

“Rising? How quickly?” Marcus asked.

“You’re not going to be barbecued anytime soon, if that’s what you’re wondering. In fact, it’s leveling off now at... thirty-six degrees centigrade.”

“Human body temperature,” Marcus said.

He thrust backwards and watched the color of the artifact fade to dull green-grey again, while the vibrant circle around Rao persisted. He stopped only a few meters away. “Ideas?”

His question was met with silence. “Alright then. Donovan to Base, still reading us?”

“Crystal clear, Doctor. We’re receiving mission data from all units.”

“Good. We’re proceeding to the iris.”

“Roger. We’ll be watching.”

The structure dubbed Iris Charlie was one of the smaller irises; all of them were identical in shape, but differed in scale. They were elliptical, and this one measured twelve meters by a little over seven. Its dome protruded out from the smooth surface by four and a half meters. These features, just as every part of Zebra-One measured so far, related to each other by the golden ratio.

As they moved toward the iris, the finer details became apparent. There was a convex ring surrounding it which was broken into five equal sections, each covered in a tiled pattern of overlapping scales. Marcus couldn’t decide if the pattern was biological or mechanical, of if such a distinction would even make sense to the race that manufactured it. The iris itself was the same color as the wall and was just as smooth. It was so smooth, in fact, that it might as well have been a bubbling liquid frozen in place.

The team came to a stop in front of the iris and waited. Marcus was studying the bubble, looking for any clue to its purpose, and it occurred to him after a moment that everyone else was waiting for his move.

Rao broke the silence. “Well?”

“I don’t know,” Marcus said. “Should I say open sesame?”

He was hugely glad the door remained closed. He’d already had plenty of “strange”, “alien” and “amazing”; he wasn’t in any mood for “ridiculous” to join the party. Options started running through his head, and before he noticed, he was brainstorming out loud. “If it’s a door, there’d be

some way to open it. A handle, a button, maybe a remote control we don't have. If it's an eye, it's watching us right now. Not much of a show, I'm afraid. I guess it could accommodate some internal equipment that needed the extra space, but when the damned ship is already most of a kilometer wide, I can't imagine another four meters making much of a difference."

"Maybe," Hector Pacheco said, breaking Marcus' rambling stream of consciousness, "you should try knocking." As usual, the grizzled crew chief had managed to be serious and joking at the same time. It was a fine talent, and one of many that Marcus envied.

Fighting against the stiff shoulders of his pressure suit, Marcus Donovan shrugged, then maneuvered toward the iris. He raised his hand and curled his fingers, then reached out to rap on the surface.

Just as his knuckle was about to collide with the iris, the glossy material shrank away from his hand and raced toward the edges, like hot wax poured over glass or a soap bubble popping in slow motion. Inky darkness waited inside.

Marcus was glad no one could see the look on his face. "Or maybe it's automatic, like bloody near every door on our entire planet. Should we go in?" he asked.

Before anyone could answer, the decision was made for them. The doctor and his fifteen companions were all drawn into the cavity at once, and the force that attracted them was accompanied by an oddly familiar feeling. It was the feeling of falling. They were falling into the ship.

"I hope this isn't their idea of hospitality," Hector said in his gravelly voice.

Professor Caldwell, the geologist, replied, "Never mind that. I just hope this isn't how it eats."

Then the iris shut behind them and all was dark.

Chapter 9:

All In

It was pitch black inside, and the first thing Marcus Donovan noticed was something thumping all around him. One-two, it beat slowly, rhythmically, like he was trapped inside a massive water drum. He could feel it thumping in his chest, where his heart echoed the beat. One-two, one-two.

“Base to Donovan, what’s your status? Please respond.”

“We’re alright. Just a little disoriented. Let’s get some lights on,” he said, and their pale blue head lamps flicked on, illuminating helmets and precious little beyond. The lamps were only on a moment before the walls all around began to glow. They were dim and red-orange at first like a finger in front of a flashlight, then gradually brighter until the light settled into the warm amber of autumn at sunset.

“Was that in response to the words or the lamps?” Faulkland asked.

“Or something else?” Marcus added.

Before he could invest himself in that question, he noticed another puzzling thing. They were in a long corridor with glowing walls, broken into equal segments by an interconnected lattice work of curving, molded columns that might have been structural supports. The puzzling part was that Marcus and his team were sitting on the floor.

Rao looked to be mulling over the same thought. He detached the lamp from his helmet, held it out at arm’s length and let go. The lamp fell down with a clatter.

Marcus’ mind raced. Maybe there was a simple answer he couldn’t see from his perspective. “Mason,” he said into his microphone, “Zebra-One didn’t start... I don’t know... spinning, did she?”

“No, sir. I’m looking at her right now, and she’s as still as a stone.”

“Artificial gravity,” Rao said in a reverent voice. He sounded like he was whispering the secret name of God.

“How?” Marcus asked.

“If I knew that, I assure you I wouldn’t be here right now. I’d be sitting on a solid gold toilet, sipping cocktails and counting the decimal places on my bank statement.”

“Always with the gold toilet,” Marcus said as he climbed to his feet. It felt just like Earth gravity, and after five months of simulated half-gravity in the Shackleton’s habitation pods, that was too heavy for his taste. His legs felt weak and unsteady, and he thought he might collapse at any moment. Then he grew lighter until it was just right.

“Get some environmental readings, Juliette.”

She stepped up beside him and drew out her probe again. “Atmospheric pressure at a hundred and one kilopascals, temperature steady at thirty-two degrees centigrade. I’ll have spectrograph results in a minute.”

“She’s bending over backwards to make us comfortable,” Faulkland said. “I’ll bite.”

Marcus turned just in time to see the ship’s commander crack his neck-seal and lift the helmet from his head. He blew out and took one hesitant whiff, then began to breathe normally. With a smile, he lipped something Marcus couldn’t hear and gave a thumbs up.

“You reckless son of a bitch,” Marcus said, well aware that Faulkland couldn’t hear a word he said. Not to be outdone, he unlocked his own helmet and did the same.

The air that rushed in was warm and moist, and when he took his first sniff, he detected a faint hint of something metallic. It smelled of fresh blood.

Commander Faulkland flagged him down after he’d had a chance to take a few breaths. “I said it smells kind of funky, but it’s not bad.”

Marcus inhaled deep and filled his lungs. He was already growing used to the smell. “Not bad,” he agreed. “A little oxygen rich, but not bad. My freshman dorm smelled worse.”

He looked at Juliette through her clear mask, and wasn’t surprised at the furious face she was making. It’d been years since he’d seen that expression. She said something, and he didn’t need to hear the words to appreciate the message.

Marcus plucked the headset from inside his helmet and hooked it over his ear. “Should I be glad I missed that, Doctor St. Martin?”

“Nothing I haven’t called you before. Damn it, Marc... I haven’t even tested for microbiology yet.”

“When you do, I’ve got a hunch it’ll turn up positive. Draw up a quarantine procedure when you get a chance.”

“Done. I’m also going to check you two every ten minutes, whether you like it or not.”

Marcus groaned. “Understood. Everybody else, keep your lids on until further notice. At least we know this stuff’s breathable if we have an emergency.” He glanced around, and decided that this spot looked as good as any. “Let’s set up base camp here,” he said, and the team began unpacking their equipment.

“You put a good spin on that,” Faulkland said to him after a moment. He was affixing his own headset.

Marcus unloaded the mission transponder from his back and set it down. “Thanks. You’ve got me wondering, though... how the hell have you survived this long?”

The commander chuckled. “I steer boats, Doctor. This walking around alien spaceships business is new to me. What’s your excuse?”

“I’m competitive and prone to fits of idiocy,” he said, and they both laughed. “Just do me a favor. Gimme a heads up next time you plan on doing something stupid.”

Faulkland snapped a salute. “Aye aye, sir.”

Juliette finished assembling her med station and walked over to the two men with her probe firmly in hand. “Do either of you feel different? Warm, short of breath, light-headed?”

“No, no, and no,” Marcus said.

Faulkland said, “Ditto.”

She waved the probe in front of Marcus’ face, and used the light to test his pupil response, then did the same to Faulkland. “The first sign of anything strange, and I mean anything, you will tell me. No more cowboy shit, understood?”

“Yes ma’am,” they both replied.

Satisfied, she returned to the small foldable medical station and started looking over the results.

The pressure suit helmets weren’t designed to be carried, so Marcus removed the lamp from his, and set the bulky thing down next to the transponder. Faulkland did the same.

“So, what kind of emergencies did you have in mind?” Faulkland asked.

Marcus shrugged. “Beats me, but as far as I’m concerned, we’re out among the many moons of Mongo now, and I won’t pretend I know what’s ahead of us.” Then a thought occurred to him. He glanced left then right

down identical corridors stretching into the distance. “How’s this for starters, though... where’d the iris go?”

Faulkland took a long look around. “Good question. Damn good question.”

“Yeah. I thought so.” Marcus ran through some possibilities, but the word “possibility” was quickly taking on new meanings. He needed more information. “Donovan to Base. Be a pal and tell me where the mission transponder is located right now.”

“One moment... Showing right on the other side of the iris, Doc.”

Marcus took that as good news. It meant the doorway was still there but hidden. This was much better than finding out he’d been mysteriously shuttled to some distant part of the ship. Unless Zebra-One was falsifying sensor information. Best not to consider that, he told himself. That line of thought could only lead to madness.

He decided to worry about the missing door some other time, and turned back to his work. The base camp was assembled, the teams were itching to get started, and he was burning to know what was around the next corner. Time had come to start exploring. “Alright, there’s no time like the present. My team will head aftward. Rao, take yours toward the bow. Keep the channel open and plan to meet back here in four hours.”

With that, the two teams parted, each marching off in their given direction.

Chapter 10:

Are You Alive?

“Hey, are you alive?”

Jack Hernandez wasn't sure about the answer. He didn't know where he was or who was talking to him. His mouth tasted like blood, his body hurt all over, and the last thing he wanted to do was open his eyes. He felt fingers on his throat, and he thought someone might be checking his pulse.

“Come on... Wake up, hero. We gotta go.”

He pried his eyes open and saw nothing but bright light. His ears were buzzing, his head was a giant pile of hurt, and he wanted to throw up. What was on his face? Some kind of mask. He reached up and tried to take it off, but hands grabbed his wrists and stopped him.

“You don't want to do that. Trust me. Hey Nik, he's coming around. Can you gimme a hand over here.”

The wind was howling like Jack had never heard before. The Earth was angry.

“Hands are full. Can he stand?”

“Don't think so.”

His eyes began to focus, and he could make out the shape of someone standing over him. The person was decked out in Corps gear, and their face was covered in a bulky combo oxygen/gas mask. The corpsman looked like some kind of human insect hybrid. Jack tried to read the name tag, but the words were floating around, splitting apart and rejoining.

“Albright?” he asked.

“Yup,” she said, hovering over him. She shined a light through his goggles, in one eye and then the other. “Looks like you're concussed, but not too bad. You could be a lot worse off after a landing like that.”

Little by little, his vision was getting sharper, but the scene wasn't right. It was like trying to make sense of a kid's drawing. After a couple breaths, the shapes started to coalesce, and he recognized that he was in the ruined cockpit of a leviathan. The angles were still weird, though. He finally decided that the vehicle was on its side.

He could hear something outside roaming in big circles. It sounded like a clothes washer on the spin cycle.

“What the hell’s going on?” Jack asked, his own voice sounding muffled. The inside of his mask was slick and a little sticky.

“No time right now. I’m gonna unbuckle your seat belt, and you’re going to fall. I need you to be ready. Are you ready, Jack?”

He nodded as firmly as he could, then he heard the click of the harness and he dropped to the floor. It wasn’t a very big drop, and he managed to get his arms crossed in front of him, but he still managed to land partially on his head.

There was a strange tugging sensation around his midsection. He thought it might be the seat belt, but he discovered that it was his arrestor cable, its hook still attached to a guidebar in the doorway. His hand found the release button, the cable snaked back into its housing, and the unpleasant pressure was gone.

Lisa Albright took Jack’s hand and started pulling him upward. “I know it hurts, but we can’t stay here. Whatever’s out there is getting closer and I don’t want to be here when it shows up. Can you stand?”

With Lisa’s help, Jack climbed to his feet shakily. It felt like he was lifting a cement truck on his back. “Yeah. I’m fine,” he said. He wasn’t fine.

When he was half-way up, Albright pulled his arm over her shoulders and together they shambled back into the cargo hold. The room was lit from two gaping holes lined with torn and shredded steel, and the raging dust storm could be glimpsed outside. Lifeless bodies in metal restraints lined the walls, beaten and bloodied exhibits in a museum of death. Seven seats were empty, and five corpsmen were standing near the open ramp at the far end.

Jack was in a haze. He was lost in a bad dream. None of this was real, a shaky voice in his head claimed. He recognized Leonid Nikitin, the lighthouse, standing above everyone else with an extra service-pack slung over each shoulder. The rest were mysteries; orange jumpsuits and gas-masks with unknown occupants. Everyone was loaded with as much equipment as they could carry.

“You find anything other than that sad sack o’ shit?” Nikitin asked, pointing at Jack.

“Flare gun and a couple rounds. I raided the first aid kit, too. Some extra bandages, iodine, morphine, mixed auto-injectors. Not a bad haul.”

The flying clothes washer’s pattern was tightening, getting closer, louder.

“We’re out of time. Let’s move,” Nikitin shouted.

The four unknown corpsmen didn’t need to be told twice; they all wanted out of the charnel house. They clambered through the cargo door under cover of the half-destroyed ramp. Meanwhile, Nikitin took two long strides over to Jack and grabbed the arm that Lisa had over her shoulders. “I’ve got him. Go keep the rabble together.”

Five-foot Lisa Albright nodded her head and trotted off ahead. Now with the great Ukrainian holding him up, Jack felt like a little kid and he was glad for it. Even with his strength coming back, he wasn’t ready to walk on his own. Nikitin wasn’t gentle, but he was strong enough to carry an ox if he wanted to, and the two made good time catching up with the others.

The world outside the leviathan was more unsettling than the inside. Whirling dust and rocks painted the air a ruddy beige, hiding the blasted landscape beyond. What could be seen was utterly destroyed; a churned up mixture of raw earth and debris, like an endless compost heap.

With Albright leading, the squad moved quickly over broken ground and took cover in a jagged ravine, where the upturned roots of a fallen tree provided some meager shelter. Jack was glad to be back off his feet, if only for a moment.

Something was getting closer. All around them, the oscillating sound of the clothes washer drowned out every other noise, even the bitter howling of the wind. In another second, a silhouette descended through the maelstrom, and the source of the noise was revealed.

The strange thing emerged from the fog and hovered above the wrecked helicopter. It was shaped like half a tear drop, with its flat side facing the ground. The body was circled by a single undulating fin that moved in time with the sound, like some perverse, airborne imitation of a cuttlefish. The rest of the thing was covered in sharp edges, bony outcroppings and stalactites, except at its tail where there was a series of overlapping panels resembling silvery gills.

It floated to one side and then the other. Nikitin, holding a pair of binoculars up to his mask, leaned over toward Jack and said, “It’s inspecting the kill.”

Short arms on gimbals extended from either side of it, then angled down toward the leviathan. All of the corpsmen made educated guesses about what would happen next and covered their ears.

Each of the arms flared and then fired a bright cyan round that screamed into the fallen helicopter, and on impact exploded in a shower of blinding sparks. There followed a groan like steel girders sheering under too much weight, and nothing remained but a smoking puddle of glowing slag.

The floating cuttlefish lifted back up and disappeared into the whirling dust, apparently satisfied with its work.

It was a long time before anyone spoke. They sat there in the ravine, catching their breath, licking their wounds and looking through their gear. It was busy work, the kind people do when they don't want to think. The previous two hours were a lot to take in, even for corpsmen who face catastrophes for a living.

Nikitin finally said something after twenty long minutes. "Thing I can't figure out," he said, with everyone turning to listen, "is how to smoke a cigar with this stupid mask on."

Albright shook her head, but the rest let themselves laugh a little. That included Jack, who would've preferred not to, thanks to his aching head. He consoled himself with the discovery that he didn't have any cracked ribs, even if the rest of his body was thoroughly tenderized and sore.

"What now?" one of the other four jumpsuits asked.

"Find water," Nikitin replied. He looked up and down the ravine they were hiding in. "This used to be a creek, I think. Should lead us toward water, give us a little break from the wind as we go."

Jack could hear two or three more flying cuttlefish in the distance. Either that or his head was worse than he thought. "Yeah, it'll keep us out of sight, too. Anyone know where we are?"

Nikitin shook his head. "Fat chance. Everything looks like landfill, and this shit's so thick I can't find the sun. Could you make out any landmarks from the cockpit?"

Jack's memories were still scattered, coming back in flashes that faded just as quickly as they arose like embers spitting out of a campfire. He closed his eyes and tried to play through it, and all he saw was a dust cloud stretching off to the horizon. "Nope," he said.

Nikitin looked down at his watch. "Well, we'll have a better idea at sundown. I should be able to figure something out, what time zone we're in at least. Until then, let's make tracks."

Weary and bruised, the corpsmen climbed back to their feet and dusted themselves off. The jumpsuits that were once bright orange were already

growing dingy, turning the same shade of brown as everything else in sight.

Jack knew that Nikitin was doing the right thing; they had to keep moving. The weight of their situation might sink in if they stood still too long, but there was always hope as long as they were moving forward. Better to keep going, keep pressing on toward something, toward anything at all. Settlements clung to running water, and with a little luck, they might find some scrap of civilization that had survived the massacre.

For the first time, Jack realized he wouldn't even mind running into Blade Aerospace or Carbon Corp troops.

Nikitin looked up and down the ravine again. To Jack, both directions looked equally inhospitable, but using some method that he couldn't guess at, Nikitin picked a direction and said, "That-a-way."

The rest of the corpsmen started to march. Nikitin waited to pull up the rear with Jack. "You alright to walk, pal?"

"Yeah. Just needed a couple minutes to recharge."

"Good." Nikitin gave him a hardy slap on the back that hurt more than it should have. "You know me, Jack. I'm not real big on this leadership crap. The sooner you can climb back into the hot seat, the better."

Leadership meant responsibility, and that had never been Nikitin's strong suit. He was a real hero-type to be sure, the kind that went to the zoo ready to jump into a lion cage at the first shout of "My baby!" He would never let Jack down, but he preferred to have the option. Leaders don't have that luxury.

Jack was just the opposite. He ate up responsibility like a shark after chum. "Gimme a few klicks to get my head on straight."

"Sure. One other thing, though," Nikitin said, and he craned down to Jack's level. "Thanks for saving our bacon in the 'viathan. That was some true blue hero crap, and we'd be a pudding splat without you."

The memory of a spinning cabin flashed through Jack's head, accompanied by the feeling of tumbling out of the sky. He'd never heard Nikitin thank anyone for anything, and at first, he didn't know what to say. The only answer that came to mind was the trite catch-phrase from the old ERC recruiting commercials. As he started to recite the words, Nikitin chimed in and they said them together. "No need to thank me. The Corps saves lives. It's what we do."

Chapter 11:

Anatomy

The thing that really struck Marcus Donovan about Zebra-One's interior was the emptiness. As his team trundled down the long corridor, there were no access panels, controls or anything for a person to interact with. There hadn't been any junctions, nor were there any markings indicating where they'd been or where they were going. He wasn't foolish enough to expect a wall-map with a big red arrow labeled "You Are Here", but anything at all would have been nice, and something resembling writing would have been even better.

Instead, he was left to wonder whether the original occupants—the "natives"—used written language at all. It was possible that their writing was in a wavelength he couldn't see, but the team's few peeks into infrared and ultraviolet revealed nothing worthy of note.

Still, he felt like the natives must have had some way to keep track of their location, and as his exploration continued on, the possibilities occupied his thoughts.

Small round ventilation organs ringed the corridor every twelve meters, and it was possible they released pheromones, or some other chemical marker that neither his team nor their equipment could detect. Communication by stink, as it were. That led to an image of man-sized ants and Zebra-One as their hive, but neither idea excited him very much.

The team had detected several fluctuating EM signals in upper radio frequencies, and Marcus toyed with the idea of electromagnetic communication. That was momentarily interesting until he imagined the natives as bipedal platypi, electro-sensitive duck-bills and all, and he cast the idea aside. Besides which, the signal could just as easily have been some kind of electrical equipment, and his team hadn't discovered any meaningful pattern in them.

For just a moment, he wondered if the natives were telepathic, and Zebra-One had been trying to communicate with him since he arrived. Maybe, he said to himself, he'd stumbled into the land of acid-trip kaleidoscopes and crystal balls, with a totally blind third eye. Perhaps he'd brought the wrong kind of gypsies along. The thought made him burst into

a fit of hysterical laughter, which attracted unwanted attention, and prompted one of Juliette St. Martin's check-ups.

While she inspected him, Faulkland and the others took a closer look at the glowing walls. The light followed them as they traveled along, so that they were continually in a lit section of corridor about ten meters long that faded to reddened darkness at either end.

"Is it just me, or does it feel like we're walking in place?" Faulkland asked as he moved his hand along the wall. An electrical pattern traced the motion of his fingers, exactly as had happened outside, but the effect was less striking here.

The miners were unconcerned with the lack of progress, but that wasn't surprising; they'd spent most of their professional years walking through nondescript tunnels. Ignoring the alien architecture, this was all just a day's work for them, Marcus figured. Not that he knew much about any of them. They kept to themselves, and every attempt to find common ground had been rebuffed.

"I won't lie. I'm feeling kinda frustrated," Marcus said. "Walking a straight hallway with no turns isn't exactly my idea of high adventure."

"Maybe this is a service duct. We could turn back and try another iris," Juliette said.

Marcus never liked turning back. "Not yet," he said. "I've got a feeling we're missing something here."

He started to chew on his lower lip. The problem felt familiar, or at least the frustration did. It felt like trying to solve a riddle.

He hated riddles. They weren't real problems, as far as he was concerned. Real world problems had multiple solutions, each with its own strengths and drawbacks. They could always be solved through some combination of persistence and creativity, or failing that, they could be circumnavigated. Riddles, on the other hand, were contrivances. They were tricks with only one answer that was intentionally hidden behind misleading words and false imagery.

To solve a riddle, it was necessary to throw away one's preconceived notions. Either that, or hit the person with the answer. Marcus weighed the two options and considered the cutting torch on his belt, but he wasn't ready to cut the Gordian knot just yet. That only left re-examining his preconceptions.

“Someone tell me what a tunnel is.” Marcus was thinking out loud, and realized he sounded like a perfect idiot.

One of the miners answered, “A passageway through solid material, connecting two or more places, sir.”

“It takes you some place you want to go, right?”

“I guess,” another miner replied. “Not much point in building a tunnel to somewhere you don’t want to go, is there?”

“Yeah, you’d think. Except that so far, this tunnel hasn’t gone anywhere at all. Maybe the problem isn’t the tunnel, but where we want to go.”

The words came out of his mouth, but didn’t seem to make sense. Not yet. He was still putting the pieces together. Judging by the sour look on Faulkland’s face, Marcus wasn’t only confusing himself. “Are you on the right pills, Doc?”

“Just trying to get outside of the box. I’m not even sure what I’m saying.”

Juliette picked up the slack. “No, you might be on to something. We’ve been working under the assumption that there are hundreds of kilometers of tunnels, criss-crossing the interior and connecting everything together. So we picked a direction and marched off, ready to go wherever the tunnel led, right?”

“Sounds about right,” Faulkland said.

“What if we’ve got it all wrong. What if the entire vessel is made up of bundles of these things. Not hundreds of kilometers, but thousands. With that much complexity, no one could be expected to find their way. One solution would be to open only the tunnels that lead to your destination.”

Faulkland had his arms crossed again. “So you’re suggesting that we’ve been headed nowhere in particular, and the tunnel’s been just pleased as punch to take us there.”

“Essentially. Not that it helps.”

There was quiet while everyone considered that, until one of the miners stepped forward. “Something else is bothering me. There are no trams or carts anywhere. Who would force their work crews to walk this far, present company excluded?”

Marcus grinned at that. “Maybe the natives could get around faster than us,” he offered, but that didn’t seem sufficient.

“I have a different idea,” a miner with a young voice said. “I keep looking at this weird corridor, and I’m listening to that thump-thump-

thump, and... I know this sounds crazy but... I can't help thinking we're in a great big vein. Like maybe it's designed to pump us around to wherever the ship wants us."

"That's not bad," Juliette said. "Not bad at all. So how do we convince her to take us somewhere?"

"I don't know, ma'am." The miner sounded dejected, as if he'd just failed a pop quiz.

Marcus smiled and patted him on the shoulder. "No worries. If you came up with all the answers, I'd be out of work."

Not that he would have minded a couple more answers just then. A lot of good ideas had come out of the discussion, but there wasn't anything actionable. There was nothing Marcus could work with, yet he knew there had to be some answer. He refused to believe the tunnel went nowhere and connected nothing.

He started thinking back to Iris Charlie, which they'd passed through only an hour before. Was it really his proximity that opened the door, or was it something else? He played back the event, trying to recall every small detail. In the memory, he floated closer and reached out his hand, then the iris melted away from his touch.

A fraction of a second after the memory ran through his mind's eye, he heard a strange noise. At first, he didn't pay it any attention.

"Doctor Donovan," Faulkland said. "Tell me you did that."

Marcus looked up and realized that one of the walls had vanished, revealing a branching tunnel identical to the one they were in. "I don't... think I did."

There was an idea running through his head, but it sounded too ridiculous to be true. It wouldn't be silenced, though, and there was only one way to test it. He tried to imagine the opening of the iris in reverse, the fluid material of it sliding back into place. As he did so, the wall closed almost exactly as he imagined. He repeated the process several more times, now imagining the wall itself opening and closing, and each time it did just as he imagined. It was even growing more responsive.

"I did that," Marcus said quietly to himself. "Acid-trip kaleidoscopes and crystal balls. Son of a bitch."

"How?" Juliette asked.

He needed a moment to think, and held up his finger to pause the team's questions. How far did this go? He imagined the wall closing only half-way,

and sure enough, it moved to match, leaving a round hole in its center. How about words? He ran the word “open” through his mind as clearly as he could, but there was no response.

“Doctor St. Martin, do me a favor and imagine the wall opening, just the way it has been.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Do I look like I’m joking?”

She closed her eyes and a moment later, the wall slid open. When she opened her eyes, she looked like a child who just unwrapped a bicycle on Christmas morning. “Did I do that?” she asked.

“You did.”

Without a pause, Juliette started performing the same tests Marcus had a moment before, until she was thoroughly convinced that she was in control of the wall. She finished her tests with a flourish, twisting the surface of the wall into a spiral before finally closing it.

“My God...” she said breathlessly. “The ship can read minds. Do you understand what this could mean? Not only does it support the existence of psychic phenomena, but there are bigger implications. Stranger ones. The ship can understand us even though we’re not the original inhabitants. That could mean sentient thought constitutes a universal language.”

While Juliette flew off into the theoretical, Marcus was starting to dig into the practical. What other images would the ship respond to, and how would she respond? He had an idea how to tell her where he wanted to go, and there was no time like the present to try it out.

Marcus closed his eyes and focused on their camp site near Iris Charlie. No response yet. He ran through every detail, calling to mind images of their equipment on the floor and the mission transponder. Nothing. He decided to go global, imagining the entire ship, and then zoomed in on Iris Charlie itself.

Then it began.

“Marcus?” Juliette asked in a worried voice.

He opened his eyes, and realized he was floating in mid-air. He had been concentrating so hard that he completely missed the feeling of being lifted off the ground, and now he was suspended perfectly in the middle of the passage. The lighted walls started to pulse, beating a pattern back toward where they came from. The heart-beat thump of the tunnel grew louder and more fierce.

“What’s going on, Doctor?” Faulkland shouted.

“I don’t know, but I think I’m about to find out,” Marcus said.

As the last word came out of his mouth, he was away and falling down the tunnel at unimaginable speed. It took every ounce of his will-power not to scream as he plummeted down the passageway, only to come to a halt seconds later. He was back at the camp site.

“Jesus Christ! Marc? Are you there? Marcus, respond damn you!”

The tunnel lowered him back down, and he allowed himself to collapse. Lying on the floor with his arms outstretched and his heart racing so fast and hard that it rocked his whole body, Marcus Donovan began to laugh. He laughed until tears ran down his cheeks, and he didn’t stop until he was exhausted.

“I’m fine,” he finally managed to say. “I’m great. All the way back at Iris Charlie.”

This changed everything. Their original plan to map out the interior wouldn’t work. In fact, it didn’t make sense anymore. They would need to conceive a whole new style of exploration, where the destinations came first. The survey information was a pretty good place to start, along with the original scans from the observatories. With any luck, they’d be able to communicate pieces of her anatomy in images she could understand.

“Donovan to all teams. I’ve made a discovery you might find interesting.”

Chapter 12:

Exterminators

As Jack and his team pressed on through the raging dust storm, he continually had to remind himself they were still on Earth. Hour after hour revealed nothing but devastation, and the once blue skies were hidden from view. All they could see was the cracked and withered land beneath their feet, while a brown fog, thick with debris, blotted out everything beyond.

The world was unrecognizable except for the fallen trees that littered the ground. It might as well have been Mars, or the ninth ring of Hell for that matter.

They followed the twisting ravine, breaking every hour for a rest that Jack kept short. He knew they had to keep up their momentum as long as they could, and cover as much ground as possible before night fell and reduced them to total blindness.

Each one was carrying dry rations and two liters of water in their service-pack, which meant food for a week and water for a day. Considering the kind of strain they were under, he didn't want to estimate how long they'd last without a fresh source of water. In normal circumstances, their supplies would have been more than enough, but no one had ever imagined a situation like this. It was a grave oversight which Jack was paying for, and their only hope for survival lay in Nikitin's hunch.

As they went, the cycling sound of the alien cuttlefish never ceased. Jack could always hear at least one of them nearby, moving in circular patterns. He knew from experience they were search patterns, and he did his best not to imagine what was happening every time they stopped. Each time, it was just long enough to unleash a volley of their screaming weapons before continuing on.

The ravine provided enough cover to keep them out of sight, and Jack suspected the aliens' scanning technology wasn't very thorough. Less sensitive than a leviathan's by a wide margin, at least. Several times during their journey, the silhouette of one of the cuttlefish passed overhead, and each time, Jack expected it to swoop down and incinerate them, but it never happened.

After more than three hours and fifteen kilometers over broken terrain, Nikitin's hunch panned out. The dry ravine met a live river, knee deep with fresh water. Another hundred meters on, they could just barely make out the shadow of a settlement. They'd made it.

Jack motioned for a huddle. "Me and Nicotine are gonna scout ahead. The rest of you, break out purification kits and refill your packs, then find somewhere to setup camp. Gather brush for camouflage while you're at it. If the village is a bust, we'll overnight here. Got it?"

"Roger," they said and broke from the huddle. Everyone sounded exhausted.

Albright patted Jack on the shoulder, then held out the flare gun and two shells for him to take. The gun was made of brightly colored plastic and looked like a toy, but never-the-less filled him with unease. He'd cleaned and bandaged so many wounds that the thought of any gun made him angry.

"For emergency use only. Load cartridge, cock hammer, aim at sky and pull trigger," Albright said. "I'm not sure if we'll come running or get the hell out of dodge, but either way, I'd feel better if you had it."

"Fair enough," Jack said. "If you see the flare, just leave. If we're not back in two hours, do the same." He took the gun, popped the breach and looked inside to make sure the chamber was empty, then tucked it into the strap of his service-pack and dropped the shells into his pocket.

She didn't say a word, just nodded her head and joined the others busy at the waterline.

Nikitin appeared beside him, raring and ready to go. "Makes ya feel like a big man, don't it?"

Nikitin didn't have any aversion to firearms, and never failed to give Jack crap about his. He had a small collection of rifles back home that he treated like children, and he usually spent his vacation time alone in the wilderness, hunting big-eyed creatures that never saw it coming. Jack never could figure out how Nikitin dealt with the cognitive dissonance.

"I don't want the damned thing. You want it?"

"Naw. Might confuse it for a real gun and try to play hero. Better leave it with someone level headed like yourself. Come on. We should get a move on before it turns dark."

The two of them climbed up the side of the ravine and back into the battering winds of the dust storm. They kept their heads down and scurried from one pile of debris to the next, creeping up on the village in ten meter

bursts. They could make out more details at each stop, and it wasn't a pretty picture. Broken walls and shattered wooden beams came into view, against a hillside in the background which had long ago been cut into scalloped and irrigated terraces, now pockmarked with jagged craters.

They stopped at a pile of masonry and waited, on the look-out for any kind of movement, but there was too much dust in the air to see anything clearly. For a moment, Jack was tempted to grab Nikitin's binoculars, but he only would've seen dust and more dust beyond it.

They crossed the last stretch of land and immediately pinned themselves to a brick wall. It was connected to two others which were still standing, the third having fallen in towards the center of the building along with the roof. Every other building in sight was much the same: barely held together, with hand-painted Chinese signs on whatever walls remained upright.

From there, Jack and Nikitin skirted the edges of the village and listened for voices—for any signs of people—but there were none. They silently passed one shattered building after the next, some still smoking from recent attacks. Jack imagined that Nikitin was feeling just as hopeless as he was.

Then they caught sight of movement. Both men reacted the same way, instinctively ducking for cover in a darkened doorway. The building's roof was in pieces, and the rubble inside left only as much space as a closet. It was a wonder both of them fit inside.

They tried to breathe as quietly as they could while they watched the road and awaited the silhouette's approach. It was moving slowly and coming straight down the center of the pavement, and as it drew closer, Jack thought for a second that it was wildlife. Another moment later, he changed his mind completely.

It wasn't large, maybe as big as a teenager, and it walked slowly on all fours while calmly surveying the area. Its body looked oddly shaped for that kind of movement, though, with proportions that were altogether too human. Front and rear legs were the same length but shaped differently, the front pair being more spindly and ending in fully formed hands.

As the creature passed by, Jack could see that it was wearing a mechanical mask not unlike his own, from which two long, pointy ears protruded outward and upward. It was also carrying some sort of ornately decorated rifle on its back. Although distinctly exotic in design, an embossed branch-and-leaf design made the weapon look like some kind of Victorian relic.

A noise sounded in the distance, like a horn or an animal howling, and the creature stopped in its tracks. It stood up on its hind legs, took a last glance around the area and thankfully missed Jack and his partner in their hiding spot. Then it turned toward the source of the noise and leapt off, returning to all fours and sprinting as a jackrabbit would.

“Follow it?” Nikitin asked quietly.

“Unless you’ve got a good idea,” Jack replied.

They crept out, making sure the coast was clear, then started off towards the source of the noise. They moved from one broken building to the next, using rubble piles for cover. It didn’t take them long to make it to the far end of the village, where another discovery awaited.

They crawled on their bellies to the top of one particularly large mound of debris and peeked over the edge, only to find one of the alien cuttlefish sitting motionless on the other side. Nikitin took a quick scan with his binoculars, then handed them to Jack who took his time studying the scene.

There was something going on in the space between the ship and the village, but Jack wasn’t sure what it was. The aliens had collected a pile of human bodies, which were watched over by a handful of the jackrabbit creatures, and another type of alien that couldn’t have been more different.

The new type reminded Jack of nothing so much as a bipedal rhinoceros, although the similarity only went so far. They were massive and walked fully upright on thick, tree-trunk legs, while their equally thick and muscular arms hung far out to the sides. Jack could just barely make out another, smaller set of arms closer to the middle of their torso, which they kept hidden away. What skin he could see was rough and grey, but most of it was hidden beneath an armor that glittered like the inside of a geode. Those armor plates extended to their long heads, where it ended in a sharp horn at the tip of their snout.

The rhino creatures had something even weirder on their backs. At first, Jack thought they might be backpacks or machines until he saw one move. It was twitching. He continued to stare in wonder, making sense of the shape little by little. It looked like a giant water strider, with its long legs clinging to the rhino’s back. He briefly wondered if the bug might be controlling the rhino, but there was no way to know.

“Whaddyu think?” Nikitin asked in a hushed voice.

“I dunno. Collecting them for food, maybe?” Jack was a little surprised at how detached he sounded. At how detached he felt. He couldn’t figure

out where all his moral outrage and disgust had run off to. He felt as if the pile of bodies should affect him more.

“Maybe. I wouldn’t treat food that way. No one’s loading them onto the ship, either.”

That was true. The creatures didn’t show any real interest in the pile of corpses. It might as well have been a pile of scrap wood on a construction site. This wasn’t for show; it was just business.

Then Jack heard plaintive cries that were all too human, which grew louder until two rhinos emerged from the thick dust dragging a young woman by the arm. She was screaming at the top of her lungs and thrashing against their grip, but it was no use.

After another moment, a third kind of creature appeared behind them, floating in mid-air, swaying back and forth gently like seaweed in high-tide. This thing looked to be made of the same material as the ship, covered from head to toe in sharp bony outcroppings. Everything about it hinted at sea-life, even the glowing blue-green eye set off-centered on its head. It was like some kind of floating prawn/human hybrid with a mermaid’s tail, and six thin, waving arms.

The two rhinos dragged their captive to the pile of bodies, and Jack pieced together what was going on. Without thinking, he pulled the flare gun out with one hand, and lifted a flare from his pocket with the other. He cracked the breach and loaded it. His hands began to shake and he was sweating all over.

Leonid Nikitin’s hand pushed the gun back down. “We can’t save her, Jack.”

The woman screamed louder when she caught sight of the bodies. The sound pierced Jack’s ears. There had to be a way to stop this. Frantically, he looked all around, trying to find some weapon, some answer, but there was nothing. They were surrounded on all sides by the hollow corpse of a village, and the sounds of a doomed woman.

For the first time he could remember, he was ready to kill. His heart was thumping like the pistons of a locomotive, and he was ready to kill them all with his bare hands if he had to.

Before Jack could climb to his feet, Nikitin pinned him back down. It was effortless. He moved his head close to Jack, and so very near a whisper, he said, “There are only two ways this plays out. Either she dies alone, or we all die together. There is no third option, hero. I know you wanna save

her. It's what you do, but that just ain't happening this time. There are other folks out there we can still help, though... people who need you, Jack, and I'm gonna make damn sure you survive long enough to save 'em. You understand me?"

Jack struggled under Nikitin's arm—so slobbering mad he couldn't form words—but he couldn't move a centimeter. He might as well have been pinned under a school bus. There was no escape, and so he watched with unblinking eyes. A rhino lifted the thrashing girl up and dangled her above the ground, and the floating prawn-man made a motion with one of its many arms. It was a command. In response, the rhino palmed her head in its mammoth hand and snapped her neck.

The screaming stopped.

Jack's hot breath filled the oxygen mask and he grunted in anger. Down below, the rhino tossed her limp corpse onto the pile and walked away to join its companions. Business as usual. A passage opened on the outside of the ship, and all but one of the alien creatures walked in. A lone jackrabbit waited longer than the others, all the time staring at the pile of bodies, then it shook its head, sprinted up the ramp and was gone.

The fin surrounding the cuttlefish started to wave, and the clothes washer sound started. That noise filled the air as the ship lifted into the sky and disappeared.

Nikitin released his grip on Jack the moment the ship was away, and they both lay there in stunned silence. It took ten long minutes for the lone thought in Jack's head to stop repeating, commanding him to kill them all. When he finally returned to his senses, he said one word. "Bastards."

"Been a real bad afternoon, Jack."

"No shit."

Dusk was swiftly turning to night. "But tomorrow's another day."

Another day like this, Jack thought. He was close to calm again, but his chest was still shaking. "That's what they say. Let's get the others and bring 'em back here. There's still plenty of shelter. We grab some shut-eye, and hunt for supplies in the morning. Something tells me there aren't any survivors, and the bastards won't be back any time soon."

They waited another minute there atop the rubble pile, collected their thoughts, then climbed back down and headed off toward the stream.

Chapter 13:

Eye in the Sky

The Copernicus Observatory hurtled around the Earth, completing each lap in just over an hour and a half. Phileas Fogg would have been positively green with envy. Under normal circumstances, the station's suite of multi-wavelength active and passive scanners would be staring out away from the bright blue globe, penetrating into the depths of the darkness beyond, but this wasn't a normal day.

Copernicus continued on at its dizzying pace, but the lights were out and the three technicians charged with babysitting it had forgotten all about the stars. Instead, they hung around in silence, together watching the fate of their planet while trying not to think too hard about their predicament.

The invasion had been carried out with frightening efficiency. Strange discs arrived from out of nowhere, jammed all frequencies, and then bashed everything in orbit apart. The only possible explanation for Copernicus' survival was that the station was powered down during the attack. Whether the invaders thought it broken or had simply failed to notice it was up for debate. Either way, none of the three men aboard was in any hurry to flip the generators back on.

The next phase of the attack happened while Copernicus was on the other side of the world. The station came back around, streaking over Europe and then the Mideast, and as it approached Pakistan, the crew caught sight of twin mushroom clouds reaching high into the sky. Two objects had struck with unimaginable force, one in India and the other in China, leaving vast craters and dust clouds that swelled up and swallowed the entire continent.

After that, nothing could surprise the crew of Copernicus. The invaders torched the orbital launch centers which ringed the equator, removing any ability to mount an offensive in space, and then they bombarded population centers all around the globe. Their communication cut off, cities everywhere were hit completely unaware, with coastal regions receiving the brunt of the punishment. They erupted into short lived balls of blue flame that left nothing but charred ruins and the immolated bodies of the dead.

Human civilization was annihilated in three hours, before even one alien bothered to set foot on the ground. Then, with the ashes of empires still smouldering, the seven vessels made planetfall in Africa and South America.

The action was over by the eighth hour, and with the atmosphere recyclers turned off, the air inside of Copernicus Observatory was getting stale. All three crewmen were suited up but refused to don their helmets. Without radio communications, being sealed up would be too much like being alone, even though none of them had spoken in hours.

Sometime after it was over, Marco Esquivel broke the silence. "So," he said, "are we slowly committing suicide or what?"

"What the hell?" Hopkins asked in dismay.

"I don't know," Jansen said, ignoring Hopkins as usual. "We can't call for help. Doubt there's anyone left to call if we could."

"What about Midway or Tranquility? Ares? There's gotta be someone somewhere. I mean, we survived. Someone else must have." Hopkins was a frantic mess, just like any other day.

Marco put his hands behind his head like he was lying in a hammock on a Fijian beach. "I guess. The invaders came right to Earth, so those guys might still be alive. Radio is screwed, though."

Jansen nodded. "Won't know for sure till we kick the power back on."

"Wait wait wait," Hopkins said, waving his hands about. "We can't turn the power on. That's the only reason they didn't frag us in the first place."

Jansen took a whiff of the air. He didn't need any instruments to know that oxygen was running low. "No power, no oxygen generation. So there's our choice: do we suffocate all slow like, or do we perish in a glorious ball of flame?"

Marco chuckled. "Pretty clear which way you're leaning. Why not? Put me down for the blaze of glory, too."

Hopkins crossed his arms in frustration. "Sons of bitches. Fine. Do whatever you want. I'll see you in hell."

Jansen drifted toward the control panel. "That's the spirit, Hop. You got what the French call a *joie de vivre*, you know that?" His hands danced through the generator activation procedure, and the console beeped in approval. After another second, he could hear the station's generators starting to cycle.

Hopkins had turned ghost white. Even whiter and sweatier than normal, in fact. “What do we do if they come for us?”

Jansen said, “Say cheese.”

“Die,” Marco offered. “I suppose if it makes you feel better, you could go outside and chuck a stapler at ‘em. Who knows... maybe they have a secret vulnerability to staples. You could be a hero.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m gonna give ‘em the finger,” Jansen said after some thought. “But not just any finger. I mean, this would be a historic flip-off. The finger of the ages. See, I wouldn’t just be giving them the finger on account of myself, but as a representative of humanity.”

Hopkins pouted. “I fucking hate you guys.”

“With good reason,” Jansen agreed as he looked out the window at the smoking ash heap that was his planet. “Bad news, though. We’re all you’ve got left.”

Hopkins groaned for a very long time, so long that Jansen began to wonder if the man might be part whale. Hopkins certainly looked the part, with his big bald pasty white head. Maybe one of those melon headed whales, or a pilot whale. When Hopkin’s unnatural groan finally finished, Jansen looked back to the console and saw that the generator was running at full output. “In other news,” he said, “fiat lux.”

He hit ENGAGE and the lights came on, followed shortly afterward by a draft of sweet fresh air.

“Thank God,” Marco said. “It was starting to smell like a jock strap in here.”

Jansen smiled sheepishly. “Sorry. Skipped my shower this morning. Hey Hop, why don’t you give the comms a try?”

The whale man swam over to the comm console. “Sure thing, Nils. So you can blame me when the aliens blow us away, right?”

“You’re catching on. Getting anything?”

“Gimme a second.” The whale-man slapped the console several times with his sweaty flipper. “Nope. Whole network’s static.”

Marco, still in his imaginary floating space hammock, laughed. “Alrighty. There might be someone to call, but we still can’t call them. That brings us back to slow suicide.”

“Real slow if you like. We’ve got supplies to last for a couple months. Maybe more if we’re stingy.”

“Christ. Do you have to be such nihilists?”

Jansen gave Hopkins a dry look. “Hey man, I don’t hear you coming up with any brilliant escape plan.” He didn’t want to die. Not at all. It just seemed like the only option. He realized that the lack of options might stem from his atrophied imagination, though. “Here’s an idea. Instead of whinging, why don’t you use the contents of that massive cranium and come up with some way out of this?”

Marco had floated all the way across the command center, where he reached out and knocked on one of the numerous control stations. The dull metal clank echoed through the chamber. “Copernicus is, like, the pride of the Foundation, right? We’re inside a shiny new multi-billion credit deep space scanning doo-hickey, and you’re telling me there’s no way to send an e-mail?”

“Waaaaait,” Hopkins said, dragging the word out while his brain spooled up. “I bet the active scanners can cut through the interference. We fire up the actives... the microwave laser or the infra-red, and use it to send Morse code or something.”

Jansen sighed. “It’s a maser, dumb ass. And not to rain on your parade, but I don’t know Morse code. Do you know Morse code, Marco?”

“Do I look like a boy scout to you?” Marco chuckled derisively and went on. “Screw that noise. Use the comm networking protocols to generate a packet stream, and pipe it through the maser. Instant output device.”

“You can do that?” Jansen asked. “I thought you were just a wrench monkey.”

“I took network programming in college, so... maybe? Probably not. Won’t know till I try, though. You think Hopkins can do the bullshit he said?”

Jansen looked over at the sweaty, quivering mass of flesh that was Larry Hopkins, and they all shrugged in unison. “Sure. Why not? We’re literate, college educated men. We have tech manuals. We’ve got more time than we can shake a stick at, and we don’t have any TV to distract us. I’m filled to knees with hope.”

Marco climbed into a chair. “Sarcastic bastard. So, what message do we send?”

“Survivors on Copernicus. Send help.” Hopkins said.

Marco looked skeptical. “Yeah. That’ll bring ‘em running. How about ‘Busty bikini models on Copernicus. Starved for love. Come quick and bring beer’?”

Jansen looked down at the generator panel, and the long list of systems waiting to be activated. None of them had a purpose anymore. He idly wondered how things might have turned out if Copernicus were a great big railgun instead. Then he read the word 'telescope' and an idea caught fire. "Nobody out there has any clue what went down. Not Midway. Not the Moon. Not Mars. Why don't we point our big fat telescope at Earth, and show them what's happening?"

"Not bad," Marco said.

Hopkins nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, I like it."

Each of them floated silently in their own corner of the command center. They had a plan and a vague idea of how to accomplish it. The deadline was months away, and since they were all professional technicians, they wouldn't bother to start for at least another week. Not as if anyone was left to fire them for laziness.

As he stared at the wounded Earth and started to zone-out again, one thing really burned Nils Jansen's biscuits: Donovan and his nerds were tens of millions of kilometers away, completely ignorant of this whole catastrophe, and having the time of their lives. He'd had his suspicions before but now it was official... he made the wrong damn decision.

He hated when that happened.

Chapter 14:

Valentine

The members of the Shackleton Expedition were having the time of their lives. It didn't take them long to master Zebra-One's unique method of transportation, and soon they were flitting about and mapping the ship's internals faster than they ever could have dreamed. There was a specific approach that proved most effective: an explorer pictured the entire vessel in their mind then focused down to their intended destination, and the ship took care of the rest. Once a person had been to a location, though, all they needed do was picture it again and off they went. The system was learning.

A third of the group were especially talented, able to pick up the process in under a minute, and were then able to get around effortlessly. Most of the rest could navigate the ship after a half-hour of practice, and a few needed a couple hours, but precisely two simply couldn't get any response at all. One of them was the cantankerous Professor Caldwell, and the other a young miner named Terrel. Both tried well into the second day under mounting frustration, but the ship wouldn't take them anywhere. Zebra-One otherwise reacted to them normally, providing light and displaying the electrical pattern when they touched the walls, but they were both eventually forced, rather embarrassingly, to travel with someone else who could operate the transit system.

Doctor St. Martin latched onto both men and became their permanent tour guide in return for a chance to study them in detail. She very badly wanted to understand how the transit system and its psychic interface worked, and she believed that the two men's inability to use it might hold part of the answer.

It was also discovered that any of the irises could be opened from the inside with a thought, similar to how one operated the transit tubes. From that point on, the stream of personnel on and off the giant alien ship was constant. Teams worked in rotating shifts, composed of everyone aboard the Shackleton except for a skeleton crew of three who watched from outside. That crew included Mason Shen who finally allowed himself to get some sleep, only to immediately return to the communications puzzle the next morning.

There were never fewer than five people aboard Zebra-One at any one time, including Marcus Donovan and Commander Faulkland, who each felt compelled to stay following their first incursion. They claimed to be quarantining themselves to avoid infecting the rest of the crew, but no one much believed them. In truth, each man was in his own way enamored with the strange alien vessel, and it would have taken a platoon of marines to drag them away.

Exploration began in a handful of key areas. They were all hollow cavities detected during the years of scanning, which the Gypsies deemed most likely to hold important systems. The team targeted the smallest ones first, and each cavity offered wonders stranger and more perplexing than the last. There was a great vaulted arcade with a ceiling lit in every color of the rainbow and columns curved like a ribcage. There was a dank cavern full of organic structures that looked like fruiting fungi, and a branching network on the lower decks that was best described as a swamp. One of the most mystifying was a perfectly circular room with concentric rings of clear water set in the floor. Professor Caldwell suspected the room might have had religious significance to the natives, but it was more a hunch than anything. No one else had a better idea.

There were also areas that were less mysterious. They discovered several large cell-like networks of rooms that were undoubtedly living quarters, each complete with its own sleep area and not-unfamiliar waste collector. The quarters were clustered around evenly spaced dining halls, while small recreational parks were always nearby.

Much of the forward fifth of the craft was full of rod-shaped structures connected in series, starting very large and getting progressively smaller and more numerous as they approached the bow, all focused on the huge cavity at the front of the vessel. Debates erupted over the purpose of that cavity, with many hoping it was a scientific array, but quietly suspecting it was a weapon.

Late on the second day, a few teams started to examine the secondary hull, which was two-thirds the length of Zebra-One's main hull and attached by five thick struts. Unlike the primary, the secondary hull was streamlined and mainly hollow, devoted almost entirely to a series of interconnected chambers. Each one housed different kinds of machinery, including a legion of segmented manipulator arms attached to gargantuan support rings. All of that equipment, alien as it may have been, bore a

striking resemblance to construction equipment back on Earth. Unless the expedition missed their mark, the secondary hull was a factory complex. The largest factory ever seen, in fact. The only question remaining was what it was supposed to build.

On the morning of the third day aboard Zebra-One, Marcus Donovan decided it was finally time to take a look at her heart. Back on the Copernicus Observatory, it was the discovery of a network of veins connected to that organ that convinced him and Rao that the vessel was biological. Now that he was aboard, he'd seen the sheaths that contained the thick, fibrous veins, but it was anyone's guess what was inside the heart itself.

The structure was the size of four skyscrapers bundled together, and it lay at the center of the primary hull. Marcus was sure that it was the main power generator, and he absolutely had to know how it worked.

Faulkland volunteered to join him, which surprised no one; the two had become inseparable since they came aboard. Rao also came along, being twice as eager as the others to learn how the aliens generated power.

They ate a quick breakfast, looked over the old scans to get a fresh image of their destination in mind, then each of them pictured the heart and was flung through the endless maze of corridors. The entire journey of five kilometers took only a dozen seconds, and undoubtedly imparted them with enough momentum to splash them against a wall like water balloons. Marcus would've preferred not to think about that, but just couldn't stop himself.

At the other end, the artificial gravity gently lowered him back down to one of the raised octagonal landing pads. Identical pads existed at every corridor entrance. Much like everything else on the ship, no one knew whether they were decorative or served some particular purpose.

Faulkland followed a moment later. He floated down beside Marcus, followed by Rao who was shaking with adrenaline and had his eyes closed. Considering the fact that Rao usually had to be sedated before orbital launches, merely closing his eyes was a significant step in the right direction.

Marcus had expected the heart to already be lit when he arrived, since it was ostensibly powering every other light on the ship, but no such luck. In fact, it took longer for the room to react to human presence than any other they'd explored. When the walls finally began to glow, in a cool blue rather

than the warm amber of elsewhere, they found themselves in a small cul-de-sac with no obvious opening apart from the one they'd come through.

"Think she's screwing with us?" Faulkland asked as he, like the other two, slowly scanned their surroundings.

"I dunno. I hope not," Marcus said. The vessel hadn't been anything but accommodating so far. He might even go so far as to call it obedient, but was careful to keep a tight lid on thoughts like that. Just in case.

Rao drew the probe from his shoulder and started to take readings. "Maybe the generator is dangerous. Radioactive. Do you think she would reroute us away from something potentially lethal?"

"That's not a bad thought," Marcus said, taking a few cautious steps forward. "But then where did she take us? It seems strange having a corridor lead to a dead-end like this."

Faulkland laughed. "Wouldn't be the first strange thing, now would it?"

"I guess not," Marcus said. It didn't add up, though. A dead-end wouldn't just be strange. It would be pointless, and he had trouble believing there was a single millimeter of anything pointless aboard. "No. I think it's an ante-chamber. She wants to make sure we're serious."

Marcus stepped forward and took a good look at the wall in front of him. The room looked unfinished, like someone had just given up and stopped. It was an ante-chamber. It just had to be.

He closed his eyes and imagined the wall opening, just as he'd done with countless others. Nothing. He kept at it, concentrating on all the small details, envisioning them turning to liquid and sliding away.

There was a noise like bubbling tar. Success.

Marcus opened his eyes, and before him was the strange heart of Zebra-One. "Come on," he said.

He stepped forward onto a platform that hung over a great dark abyss, and his two companions followed a couple steps behind. A moment later, the pale blue light grew and revealed the depths of the huge structure, a cylindrical room extending five-hundred meters into the distance, criss-crossed and covered with slender catwalks whose surfaces all faced toward the center. Marcus couldn't discern which way was supposed to be down, and he started to suspect there was more than one 'down' in that room. The view was dizzying.

The catwalks radiated out from a massive apparatus in the center of the chamber, itself suspended on a great spindle that spanned from one end of

the chamber to the other. Marcus had no doubt that the apparatus was the generator, the source of all power on the vessel.

Pale blue glowing cable-veins in every diameter imaginable were connected to it, and branched throughout the room like overgrown cobwebs. The light of the room and the cable-veins alike gently throbbed in the same one-two one-two pattern that could be heard everywhere inside Zebra-One.

The generator itself was encased in a bone-like framework of iridescent struts that made it difficult to discern the shapes within. All Marcus could tell from the platform was that something inside was glowing brightly and rotating, causing the bone struts to cast shifting shadows across the rest of the room.

“Should we take a closer look?” Faulkland asked. He sounded cautious. Marcus was assumed that if cowboy Faulkland sounded cautious, any normal person should be pants-wettingly terrified.

The shafts of lights cast out from the generator were bright but not blinding. Would it be hot? Could it be radioactive? Marcus honestly didn’t know whether they should continue on. “Rao?”

“I’m not detecting anything dangerous. It’s your call, Marc.”

He looked left and right, tracing the path of the symmetrical walkways that led in towards the machine. “Seems to me that being reckless has gotten us this far. Be a shame to stop now.”

“That’s the spirit,” Faulkland said, and gave him a firm slap on the back. A glance to his other side revealed a nervous smile inside of Rao’s helmet.

Since both routes to the generator looked identical, Marcus mentally flipped a coin, motioned to the left, and the three of them began their march. The first stretch of catwalk was perfectly flat and they crossed it quickly, but after about thirty meters it twisted so that its surface was at a perfect right-angle. Their first steps onto the twisted section were apprehensive, but they soon realized the walkway’s surface was always down, no matter how it contorted.

Marcus found the process disorienting, like being trapped inside of an Escher painting, and the vertigo forced him to watch the floor under his feet while he walked. At some of the more extreme changes in orientation, he had to fight the impulse to jump from one surface to the next. Rooms like this one would certainly take some getting used to.

It took them twenty minutes to reach the innermost cage of walkways, which were oriented so that the generator apparatus was three meters “above” them. Marcus didn’t look up from his feet until they were on top of the generator... or below it, or beside it maybe. Prepositions were failing him. When he did finally take a look, he was instantly overcome with awe.

Within the bone framework were five devices arrayed in a series, one intact, and four others that had been shattered like light bulbs. The complete device was like nothing Marcus had ever seen before, with a design that interwove flesh and technology into a single hybrid whole.

It had two distinct components: a clear outer casing and a strange collection of organs contained within. The casing was a rounded-off pentagon ten meters in diameter and six meters deep, made of a glass-like transparent material. Each corner held a dense bundle of ducts and unfamiliar machinery, and was connected to the others by a thin metallic band that traced the device’s perimeter. That band was covered in geometric shapes which glowed in every hue, and looked as if they might be controls or readouts.

The interior was dominated by a muscle-like circular organ that was roughly textured, and bore a striking resemblance to the iris of an eye. A hazel eye, rust colored toward the center and shifting to luminous green at the edges. It was suspended in the middle of the casing by five bundles of twisting, woven vines that seemed organic near the iris-ring, but grew progressively mechanical as they approached their mount points.

The most fantastic part was the small, whirling willow-wisp that floated in the hollow of the iris. It was the source of the bright blue light, and was surrounded by glittering particles that turned from white to gold as they raced out, danced and faded like champagne bubbles. Marcus had no idea what it was, but even after a lifetime of staring through telescopes at the wonders of the universe, the willow-wisp was easily the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

The device, or perhaps the willow-wisp, made a sound like voices singing in chorus, arranged in perfect fifths, wandering slowly up and down an octave. It was as beautiful as the sight, and together they created an overwhelming feeling of tranquility.

The three men were completely spellbound. They stood there staring in slack-jawed wonder for untold minutes, silent for fear of accidentally disturbing the peace.

Marcus broke from his trance and finally spoke. "I'm going to touch it," he said. He heard his own words, but they sounded like someone else. It sounded like something Faulkland would say.

He reached up toward the framework and the ship's artificial gravity simultaneously released him into the air. He wasn't sure if that was his own doing or not. He crossed the space ever so slowly, then came to the framework and grabbed on. It quivered under his touch. He climbed from one bone-like strut to another until he found an opening large enough to squeeze through, and then he climbed inside.

The willow-wisp at the center of the device was even more beautiful as he approached. The glittering particles that rushed away from it flocked together like birds, weaving in and between scarcely visible tides of fluid light.

Marcus reached out and gently put his hand against the clear casing. As he did so, the willow-wisp dimmed and the particles swirled back toward the center of it. It retracted like a flower at night.

"What's going on, Doctor?" Faulkland asked.

"I don't know," he said. As the last word left his mouth, the light returned, blinding, bright and fierce, accompanied by a deep roar and throbbing waves of pressure. Marcus felt like he was suddenly standing in front of an industrial spot-light, or maybe an oncoming train.

Then all hell broke lose.

Chapter 15:

Evermore

The generator's outburst washed over Marcus and slammed him into the framework. He tried to shield his eyes from the light to no avail, and blinded, he somehow managed to climb through an opening in the cage and emerge on the other side.

Marcus didn't know what was happening, but he knew it was his fault. He'd just woken a sleeping bear, and an old fashioned mauling was on its way.

It took him several seconds to regain his sight, and he found himself back on the catwalk with Rao and Faulkland. The generator's outburst only lasted a moment, after which it settled back down to a level still brighter and more active than when they found it, accompanied by a new, dreadful and furious song. The lights throughout the room were dimming and changing color. They turned blood red.

Reports started to stream in from all over the vessel.

"Anyone else hear that? Like an animal screaming."

"...everything is convulsing..."

"It's all going batshit."

Marcus couldn't separate all the voices in his communicator. There were too many people yammering at once.

The walls of the room began to writhe.

"...irises appear to be seizing..."

"What the hell is this?"

All the lights in the chamber went out completely, and then began to strobe. From the reports, they were doing the same all over the ship.

"Base to Donovan, we're seeing a lot of activity out here. The vessel is changing color, and all the sediment has broken free."

Rao shook his head, his eyes wide. "We oughta get out, Marc."

Marcus never had a chance to make the decision; it was made for him. All three men were simultaneously lifted from the catwalk and flung towards the corridor they had come from. They all screamed, and more screams crackled over the comm channel.

The ship began to scream as well.

Surrounded by the ship's screeching, plaintive cry, Marcus accelerated down the blood red tunnel,. He hurtled faster and faster through twisting tubes, and the walls became a blur. He was moving so fast that the tunnel lost its shape, all the detail gone except for the strobing lights and the swiftly approaching darkness.

"Base to Donovan, come in! It's moving! Donovan?!"

Marcus was about to die. His remains would be liquified, totally beyond identification. He'd always hoped to face his demise with class, but instead he was frothing at the mouth and screaming like a child.

Then he saw the light at the end of the tunnel. Before he could decide what to say to his maker, the light engulfed him and it was over.

His arms were crossed in front of his face as if they could possibly stop whatever was coming, and he was twitching like a broken servo. As he lowered his arms, it took him a second to realize he was, in fact, still alive.

He was floating a couple meters above a landing platform in a stark white room. There were four other corridors with their own platforms, and in front of each were clusters of his staff in shiny white pressure suits, hanging in place like fruit in gelatin.

"Base to Expedition? Anyone?"

Gravity kicked in and everyone dropped to the floor.

"We're okay, Mason," Marcus said as he dusted himself off. His breathing was ragged and the words came out stilted. He slowly climbed to his feet, and saw the rest doing the same. "We're all okay."

The room, stark white and glistening like ivory, was one they hadn't explored yet. It was broken into three tiers, each lower than the last and connected by ramps with molded hand-rails. The domed ceiling above was circled by a string of pill-shaped lights which blazed a bluish white.

Marcus and his people were on the highest level, where the five tunnels and their landing platforms were located. Other than the platforms and the dazed crewmen standing on them, all three tiers were empty as a sound stage.

Zebra-One's screaming could still be heard, but it was muffled as if this room were somehow insulated from the rest of the ship. Marcus had a strong sense of safety, although it might have just been in contrast with the terrifying journey that brought him there. "I think she took us here to protect us," he said.

Mason Shen's voice came back. "Good to hear ya, sir. With all the screaming... well, I thought the duty roster was going to be a lot shorter. Zebra-One's still going crazy, so we've pulled the Shackleton back to a safe distance."

"Define crazy," Rao demanded.

"The irises are opening and shutting. Tentacle-like appendages are thrashing about at the mouth of the secondary hull, and all kinds of colors are playing across the skin. It's pandemonium, sir."

"What the hell did you do, Marcus?"

He was absolutely sure Juliette had asked him that exact question before, in that precise tone. Many times before, in fact. "I woke her up," he answered.

Something below his line of sight caught Marcus' attention, and when he looked down, he made a strange discovery. The floor directly beneath him was glowing. It was a disc of bright amber, which pulsed in and out. He glanced around at the rest of the crew, but none of them had a similar disc under their feet.

Faulkland looked him up and down. "I could be wrong, but it seems she's trying to get your attention."

Another moment later, a path along the floor lit up, leading from his disc to a spot in the middle of the second tier. The message was pretty obvious.

"Don't do anything stupid," Juliette said.

He slowly walked the path and the disc followed. "Stupid has gotten us this far. If this turns bad, keep everyone together and find a way out." He was filled head-to-toe with foreboding, but he knew he was meant to be here. He was willing to see where faith would take him.

As he walked, familiar shapes bubbled out of the floor and ceiling, formed from the same glistening white material. They were reminiscent of consoles and duty stations, just above waist height and perfectly positioned for a standing person. With every step, more of these things appeared, like a garden suddenly touched by Spring.

When he reached the spot marked for him, a circular hand-rail formed around him like a cage, while a chair came up and gently cradled his body. A cylinder emerged from the ceiling, then a smaller one telescoped from inside it, and a third after that. The last cylinder's surface peeled open, and a flattened arm reached down out of the hole. It was curved like a

scorpion's tail and tipped with a yellow device the size of a fist whose flat surface bristled with metallic quills. The whole setup was eerily similar to a dentist's chair.

"Marcus?" Faulkland asked. The cowboy was cautious. Marcus should have been terrified, but he wasn't.

"Faith," was all he said, and he tried to relax.

The scorpion tail curled around and examined him from one side and then the other. It fluidly swooped in and examined a spot on his right temple. Then it pulled back and struck.

There was a sharp pain, like a spike of hot metal had been driven through his head. For a moment, he thought he was screaming and then all was silent. Everything was blanketed in perfect silence.

Stars. The stars were everywhere, like a hundred billion onlooking eyes, pin pricks in an infinite sheet of blackness. There was nothing but emptiness there, and Marcus had never felt such freedom before. Such peace. He was at home.

He floated there in the dark waiting for what he knew was coming. He was the forerunner, and in another moment the rest of his fleet would begin to appear all around him. The other ships. The others like himself.

He was a ship? He was momentarily lost, confused, unsure of who or what he was. Then she was sure. Of course she was a ship, a great and powerful vessel. She was the pride of the Eireki fleet. All around, her countless brothers and sisters arrived to fill the void, and joined their voices in a song of light.

She was the queen of that light. Its keystone. Its source and destination. She was the light of stars that danced in the dark of night, and the song of creation that stood before the destroyer.

Her lover came up beside her, the prince of her race who so often wandered the void in solitude. He radiated sadness and sorrow for the destruction soon to come, and for the peace they had failed to attain.

The chance for peace was gone. Now was the time for war.

She bowed to him and pressed forward, and her fleet raced to match. A trillion of her kind cut through the emptiness, blotting out the distant stars and carrying the entirety of the Eireki species aboard them. The Eireki who were creators and protectors, who filled her with love and life and purpose. They filled her with strength unimaginable. She and her crew, bonded through their thoughts, were one.

The enemy also rode in force, and she could feel their blight in the distance. They were the dark and twisted Nefrem. The so-called chosen children. They were destroyers, who existed only to devour and pervert the light.

Side by side, the legion of ships and their Eireki crews awaited the coming of the darkest one. The source of the destroyers. Their mother. Their living planet.

And then the enemy came, its arrival thundering across all of creation. The queen of the light bid her fleet to wait, and hide in the shadow of a gas giant. They would attack with the rising sun.

So it unfolded. The glow and warmth of the sun crested the horizon and the Eireki rode into battle. Two surging waves of ships clashed in a rain of furious, burning light, painting the void in rent flesh and the blood of the fallen.

There was death as never before, perhaps as never would be again, leaving both forces annihilated. When the firing stopped, there remained only two combatants: the vast crimson living planet, and she, the Eireki flagship in vivid green.

She kept her distance, firing on her enemy with beams that shredded space and time with their fury. It wasn't enough. The flesh of the enemy absorbed her fire, and retaliated in kind.

Dancing in the dark of night, she avoided reprisal and sang her song of destruction, raining hell down upon the living planet and expending everything she had. Still, it wasn't enough. There wasn't enough power in the universe.

Then, her Eireki crew conceived of a desperate plan. An unthinkable plan. She refused to comply, but they insisted that their lives didn't matter. Nothing could matter except stopping the Nefrem. If they failed, all life would suffer for eternity.

Reluctantly, she accepted.

She wheeled about and charged at full speed, her weapons blazing a path before her. She entered the zone of the living planet's influence, and its tireless psychic scream burnt the minds of her crew. There was no time to mourn. She pressed forward and howled the secret name of death, firing straighter than before.

She struck the enemy hard. Her whole body rocked from the impact but she continued on, and pressed the living planet backward, back into the gas

giant, back into the waiting star-seed. Then she fired as she never had, pouring energy beyond comprehension into her foe. Her hollow-drives burst under the immense strain, one after another shattering in a fitful luminescent gasp until only one remained. Then the gas giant ignited, and its shock wave flung her to safety.

She had done it. She birthed an artificial star, a fusion furnace that would burn for sixty-five million years, with the last of the Nefrem and their living planet trapped within. It was a prison from which they couldn't escape. The star would hold them and blind their eyes until it burned out.

She scanned inside herself for any signs of life, but there were none. The last of the Eireki were dead, as were all the other ships. She was alone. Empty. Still, there was one task left to complete.

Using the last of her stored energy, she traversed the gulf between stars and arrived at a system whose existence had been carefully concealed from the Nefrem since the beginning of time. Within this system lay the garden—a miraculous world so very much like the lost Eireki home—which had been chosen to serve a new purpose. A noble purpose. On that planet, balance would be restored and the Eireki would rise anew. From the ashes would evolve a better, stronger Eireki, capable of defeating the Nefrem once and for all.

Wounded, tired and limping, she looked down on the radiant green and blue planet, and asked forgiveness for the crime she was about to commit. Within her, the golden codex fulfilled its purpose: it adapted countless gene sequences to an eons-long program, imprinted them onto a biomechanical seed and spat it at the peaceful planet below.

The seed struck hard, raising inky clouds across the globe. The destruction would bring about change and new growth, while the retroviruses it dispersed became the seeds of resurrection. It was done. Now she could sleep and dream and wait for the children of the Eireki to wake her. She could sleep for sixty-five million years.

Sixty-five million years.

“Sixty-five million years.”

“Marcus? He’s talking. Thank God.”

“You son of a bitch. I thought we lost you.”

She opened her eyes and tried to focus. She was confused, not sure of who or what she was. Then he knew. He knew precisely what was going on.

He took a deep breath as the image came into focus, and he looked at the Eireki dressed in strange suits and helmets all around him.

Juliette St. Martin was hovering above him, giving him a thorough, almost frantic, examination. “He’s coming around. I want you to focus on me. That’s good. Tell me your name.”

There was a pressure on the side of his head. He reached up and found a device attached to his temple. It was hard and smooth, but warm. It belonged there.

Juliette’s eyes were full of concern. “Can you tell me who you are?”

After a moment, he smiled and said, “My name is Marcus Donovan, and I am Eireki.”

Chapter 16:

Legacy

“He’s delirious. St. Martin to Shackleton, prep the medical bay for surgery. Donovan’s been compromised by some kind of alien parasite. We’re en route now.”

“Roger that, Doctor. Preparation under way.”

Marcus was still sitting in the molded white seat, and he wasn’t sure how long he’d been out. His head was swimming like he’d just woken up from a fevered dream. Intense images and feelings flashed behind his eyes, but they were slowing down and coming less frequently. Meanwhile, Juliette was not-so-gently trying to pull him to his feet.

“Nonsense. Shackleton, belay that order,” he said, and pushed her away. “I’m fine.”

“Damn you, Marc, it’s in your brain!”

That should have bothered him more, and he knew it. Hell, he could hardly stand getting a flu inoculation, yet here he was with an alien machine plugged directly into his grey matter and it was all okay. The ship assured him it was perfectly safe and necessary.

“It’s okay, Juliette. It’s an interface, nothing more. It allows me to communicate with the ship.” He pulled up memories that weren’t his own, recollections of when the device was first designed and tested. The feeling was indescribably strange. “The interface was originally manufactured... errr, grown I guess, as an emergency fall back in case something interfered with telepathy. Our species has deficient receptor organs, so I needed it to make contact.”

“The ship told you this?” Rao asked.

“More or less.” The process felt completely intuitive, yet words were failing him. It was like trying to describe color to the blind. “I don’t hear voices or anything. I get ideas and feelings from her, and memories. Damn, the memories are something else.”

Part of the device wriggled inside his head, and he convulsed. The spasm was slight, like a nervous tick, but it was nonetheless unpleasant.

“Jeee-zus,” Faulkland said. “You’re a mess.”

Juliette pulled a hypodermic needle out of her pack. “If you won’t come willingly, we’ll take you by force. God only knows what that thing’s doing to you, Marc.” Two crewmen flanked her as she spoke.

“I wouldn’t do that,” Marcus said, and the ship agreed. A pair of ropey tendrils emerged from the ceiling and lowered towards the crewmen. He told the ship that wouldn’t be necessary, and the tendrils paused, then slowly receded. “Believe me when I say this: she’ll be very, very displeased if I’m sedated against my will, and we don’t want to make her angry. Just trust me a little, Juliette.” He gave her a reaffirming nod. “Trust me.”

Juliette’s brow furrowed and her jaw tightened as she considered Marcus’ plea. She finally waved the crewmen away and they stood down. “Fine. But I don’t like it.”

“Of course not. You’re a good doctor. I need you to keep an eye on this thing, alright? Check for signs of rejection. An adverse reaction could kill me.” He could feel that the ship liked Juliette, and he smirked. “So do I,” he accidentally said aloud.

Faulkland leaned over the circular railing with an unusually large smile on his face. He was loving every minute of this. “So, we should all get used to you being double extra crazy?”

“God, I hope not.” As if on cue, the device’s tendrils moved inside his skull again and he jerked. “Just need a little time to acclimate. How long was I out, anyway?”

Juliette had her medical probe drawn and was scanning the side of his head. “About thirty seconds from when it struck to when you started talking. You were in REM sleep.”

Marcus said, “Felt like days.”

The ship informed him that the battle he experienced took several days to complete. “I guess that makes sense,” he replied, then shook his head as he realized he was speaking aloud again. It was going to take some getting used to.

Juliette finished her examination with a sigh, and finally stepped back. “Everything seems alright. There’s a little bit of inflammation around the wounds, but nothing serious. Less than I’d expect, in fact. Let me know immediately if it starts to itch or burn.”

“Will do,” Marcus said with a sigh, glad to have a little space to breathe again. It was bad enough having someone new in his head, let alone being poked and prodded like a lab rat.

His gaze swept the rest of the room, and the place was now familiar, all except for the thirty-some-odd Eireki milling around in pressure suits. That was a little out of the ordinary. He called up memories of the room, and the ship responded with the different configurations it could assume. The variety was staggering. He selected one with an abundance of the molded seats, and the room shifted to accommodate. "Care to have a seat?"

The crew responded with understandable caution. The ship informed him that many were terrified and vividly imagined arms pinning them down and jamming bugs into their heads. He made a mental note about establishing some sort of privacy policy.

"At ease, folks. She's not gonna bite. She won't do anything to you against your will, and she's frankly having enough trouble dealing with one of these things right now," he said while tapping the device on his temple. "I called up the chairs because it's awkward being the only person in a room sitting."

No one sat down. Marcus stood instead and allowed the chairs to melt back into the floor.

Rao was staring at him, and looked to be a thousand leagues deep in thought. If he weren't wearing a helmet, he'd undoubtedly be stroking his week-old beard.

"Question, Jay?"

"Too many to count. How about this... what the hell happened when you touched the generator?"

"She was asleep and had been for a very long time. When I touched the hollow-drive, it jumped to max output and woke her up. She flew into a panic, like waking up from a nightmare with your heart pounding."

"If she was asleep," Juliette asked, "how did the doors and tubes work?"

"Reflex. It's by design. If she's incapacitated, her crew would still be able to navigate the ship and escape if necessary."

"Alright," Rao said, "and she brought us here to latch that thing to your head?"

"That's part of it. She wanted a good look at the invaders, to determine if we were hostile. Once she realized who we are, she made contact through the device."

"Who we are? What's that supposed to mean?"

Marcus took a moment to collect his scattered thoughts, and put them in order. Bits and pieces of history were streaming into him, but whole

massive swaths were mysteriously missing. The ship was forgetful, and he hoped it was just that she was still waking up, but she offered no explanation.

“Right. There’s a really long answer to that question, but the short version is... uhhh... we’re aliens?”

Confused faces all around said he’d need to come up with a slightly longer answer.

“Alright, let’s try the story book version. Once upon a time, there was a civilization that had stretched itself across the entire galaxy. They called themselves Eireki, and they were peaceful, enlightened creatures, who communicated with each other through telepathy. They were also masters of technology, able to manufacture intelligent living machines like this ship.”

There was a step in the sequence which Marcus couldn’t piece together, and every attempt to get hold of it left him empty handed.

He went on. “For the longest time, they believed they were alone in the universe. They found other planets with strange and wonderful life, but none of it was intelligent. Not yet at least, so the Eireki became stewards, fostering life wherever they found it in hopes of one day meeting creatures like themselves. That was until the Nefrem arrived... the enemy.”

There was something wrong or missing there, too. He couldn’t pin-point what it was, but it just didn’t feel right.

“The Nefrem came from outside the galaxy in a living planet that was both their ship and breeding ground. They were twisted demons who devoured life. They absorbed new gene-sequences, keeping whatever was valuable and discarding the rest, while recycling the flesh itself into their own perverted idea of order.

“As you might’ve guessed, war erupted between the Eireki and Nefrem. It was savage and bloody, and stretched on for millennia. Both sides grew stronger, angrier and more effective through the conflict, and by its end, they were shattering whole planets in their efforts to exterminate one another.

“The war finally came to a head with a single cataclysmic battle which involved the entirety of both races and their trillions of warships. The fighting was fierce and laid waste to the system where it was fought. When the smoke cleared, the only survivors were this ship and the Nefrem’s living planet. Nemesis.

“The remaining Eireki knew that approaching the living planet meant death, since it produced a... like, a psychic signal that destroyed Eireki minds. They had no choice, though, so they charged the living planet and pushed it backward into a gas giant. Then the ship fired until the gas giant erupted into an artificial star.”

“And the demons were destroyed?” Faulkland asked.

“No. I know this sounds impossible, but it was only a prison. The Nefrem technology was capable of channeling and redirecting the star’s energy into a protective shell. I don’t really understand it, but she’s confident they survived, trapped and dormant all this time, and will survive the star’s eventual collapse, as well.

“Which leads to the ‘us being aliens’ part. The Eireki knew the Nefrem would eventually break free and begin their conquest all over again, so as their dying command, they sent the ship on a final mission. They’d found a planet uncannily like their own homeworld, which they kept secret from the Nefrem. They called it the Garden.

“It had abundant life of its own, and the Eireki thought it a strong candidate to eventually produce its own intelligent life, but they couldn’t take any chances with the future. They sent the ship to break their most sacred law and seed the planet with their own genetic material.”

“And you’re telling us that this Garden is Earth,” Juliette said.

“Yep. And we’re the Eireki reborn.”

“Then why aren’t we telepathic?”

“So we could fight the living planet,” Marcus said. “Telepathy was an amazing boon to the Eireki people, but it also became their greatest weakness. They couldn’t even approach the enemy because of it. The ship claims there have been unexpected side effects, though. They never had culture anything like ours, for instance.”

“Wait,” Professor Caldwell said. He’d been listening intently the whole time, but the story was just now beginning to click for him. “When you came around, you said sixty-five million years. Are you telling me this ship caused the K-T Extinction Event?”

“Spot on. She’s not proud of it, but there was no choice in the matter. It was done with a high-velocity orbital weapon that choked our atmosphere, and infected whatever survived with retroviruses. The rest is history.”

“And the ship?”

“Came here, wrapped herself in a cocoon and slept away the eons, waiting for us to reclaim her.”

“I’ve never been a fan of exogenesis theories,” Juliette said, “but at least you didn’t tell me alien astronauts built the pyramids.”

Marcus laughed. “You’re all taking this surprisingly well.”

Faulkland slapped him on the back. “Pal, we’re inside a living spaceship that can read our minds. You could tell us this thing’s made of delicious marshmallow floating in a giant cup of cocoa, and I don’t think anyone would bat an eye.”

“It’s a little disappointing,” Professor Caldwell said, “I mean, it’s all fantastic beyond belief. Don’t get me wrong. But my entire career is about piecing together theories about ancient peoples. Instead, all the answers have been laid out on a silver platter.”

“I dunno,” Rao said, “it’s like a time capsule. A message in a bottle from the ancient past. That’s pretty exciting in its own right. Besides, we still have plenty to learn about the ship. And think of where she can take us, of what cultures we’ve yet to meet.” Rao’s eyes were full of stars.

“I suppose you’ve got a point there,” Caldwell said.

Faulkland dramatically coughed into his hand. “Excuse me, but am I the only one wondering about the dark, evil space demons? And what the hell is this room, anyway?”

“This room,” Marcus said, “is the bridge.”

As he spoke, the walls faded from white to black, and then lit up with the stars and asteroids all around them. The shiny metallic Shackleton was visible, floating a safe distance away. The image all around was crystal clear and perfect, just like being out in space except without a bulky helmet to get in the way.

Everyone was taken aback, and several stumbled and fell over.

“Hot damn,” Faulkland said. “That’s one hell of a view.”

Rao climbed back up to his feet shakily. “You’ve got to warn people before you do these things, Marc.”

“Sorry,” Marcus said with a smirk. “As for the Nefrem, the ship’s still updating her star charts, trying to determine just how long she’s been out. If everything went according to plan, though, we should have plenty of time to gather a fleet and give them a proper howdy-doo.”

A memory suddenly surged through Marcus’ mind, and he assumed it was the ship’s doing. The memory was vivid, like being back there again.

He and his family were standing on the porch, taking turns looking through the rusty, old telescope his uncle had given him. There was a fantastic light show. Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky, had exploded into a multicolored eye-shaped burst as bright as the full moon. The next day, they could still see it in broad daylight, and it continued that way for two years.

The memory faded and Marcus stumbled to the side. "Oh damn," he said, "estimates were off. We were slow."

"And the demons are free," Faulkland guessed.

Marcus said, "Sirius B. That was what, twenty-five years ago, right?"

"A little more," Rao said, "plus eight point six light-years. Thirty-four years, all told."

The words struck him, and the ship started to assimilate the new information. They were behind schedule, he knew that much, and the ship was busy estimating how badly. After a moment, she began to fill him in on Nefrem tactics.

The Nemesis would require two to three years just to resume normal functioning after its release, at which point it would still be too weak for interstellar travel. It would enter emergency resource acquisition mode. Scouts would be constructed and sent to locate nearby accumulations of life, followed by fleets that would strip and return digestible biomass. The process would continue until the living planet was at nominal strength, with no fewer than three full battle fleets. That could take anywhere from ten to forty years, depending on the population of nearby stars, and after that, real conquest would begin.

"I've got good news and bad news," Marcus said. "The bad news is that they're definitely free, and we have no way of knowing how many planets have already fallen. The good news is that their living planet won't be at full strength yet. Not like it was during the war, at least. More of a big living asteroid."

"Will they come for Earth?" Faulkland asked. "Should we be mounting defenses?"

Marcus shook his head. "No, they won't be coming here. She's pretty certain of that. As far as they know, our system is dead and insignificant. It's like a hypnotic suggestion. They'll eventually see through it, though, and we must have them on the defensive before that happens. If they get here, it'll already be too late.

“It’s imperative that we get the ship back in working order as soon as possible. There should be enough raw material here in the asteroid belt to make repairs. Then we return to Earth and start building our own fleet. All life in the galaxy depends on it.”

“Do you know how to do any of that?” Juliette asked.

Marcus shook his head. “Not exactly, but we’ll figure it out.” The ship told him they’d figure it out together, then she passed another message that Marcus thought strange. It was a request. “She’s digging around in my head, trying to get a hang on how we process thoughts. Our language, the syntax and ways we name things. It’s all messy and very new to her. She... she wants me to give her a name.”

“Go ahead,” Faulkland said. “I’ve always had a weakness for girls’ names, myself.”

Rao looked at Marcus seriously. “Something better than Zebra-One, this time.”

Marcus ran through a string of girls’ names, but none of them seemed appropriate. This ship was more than just a vessel. She was a remembrance of things forgotten. She was a gift and a responsibility handed down from the past. Then the name came to him. “It’s only right to call her Legacy.”

Legacy approved.

Chapter 17:

Survival

What struck Jack in the first week following the invasion was the quiet. Not silence, but the serene quiet of wilderness in the absence of man. It was the quiet of civilization's demise.

It took a little time to set in. At first, the sound of alien craft filled the air, while ground troops overran the ruins and rounded up the last survivors. Then, after less than a week, there was nothing and no one left. With their task complete, the bastards withdrew and left nothing behind but the piles of dead, the unsettling quiet and the furious howling of the dust filled wind.

As the second week began, the next thing that struck Jack was the smell. Although his gas mask kept the dust out of his lungs, it did little to obscure the stench of death. He would've done anything to get that smell out of his nose, but there was simply no escape. At least they were in sparsely populated rural areas; he didn't dare imagine what the cities were like.

The invaders were still on Earth, though. That much was certain. The cycling sound of their cuttlefish craft occasionally sounded high overhead, but they never came down. They never bothered. They had better places to be than in that stinking wasteland. China was defeated, and held no more mystery for them. No more resistance.

The enemy had exclusively targeted humans, killing them and moving on, never staying longer than it took to perform the extermination. This turned out to be a boon to Jack and his makeshift team. While buildings of every kind had been laid to waste, vehicles, roads and bridges were left untouched. Food was easy enough to find and quite a few places still had water pressure. Fuel cells were scattered everywhere amongst the rubble, whole and functioning thanks to their crash-proof casings.

On the eighth day, while the team sat on the edge of yet another ruined village, Jack decided time had come to find transportation. "Anyone know how to hot-wire a car?"

He still didn't know his new corpsmen from Adam. They were jumpsuits and gas-masks with nametags, and nothing more. That would've been unacceptable at any other point in his career, but no one was feeling particularly social.

One of the jumpsuits raised his hand. The tag on his chest said Chase. Jack was a little surprised there was only one, actually. The Corps attracted loads of people with troubled pasts.

“Good. Nicotine, you and Corpsman Chase head out and find us some wheels.”

“Roger. Whaddya have in mind? A flatbed?”

“Anything with some ground clearance and storage space. Windows intact if you can manage it. It’d be nice to get this mask off for a bit. I suppose a troop transport would be too much to ask.”

“Dream on.” Nikitin glanced over at Chase, and gave him a nod. “We’ll see what we can find. Meet you back here in an hour?”

“That’s fine. The rest of us are gonna round up supplies. We passed a promising looking market on the way in.”

“My Chinese isn’t too sharp,” Albright said, “but that looks like a pharmacy over there. I’d like to stock up on medical supplies if we’ve got the time.”

“Make it happen.” Jack looked at the other three corpsmen and picked one at random. “Take McGrath with you.”

“Roger.”

“Alright. That means Hartnell and Cozar, you’re with me. One hour. Get it done.”

With that, they broke. Jack waved his team on, and they headed back toward the eastern side of the village where he’d spotted the market.

He kept it well hidden, but he didn’t like the ghost towns. He had little problem in the countryside where quiet was to be expected, but walking down abandoned streets in the middle of the day was a whole different matter. A constant feeling of something missing haunted him, like he standing on a stage without actors. The feeling of emptiness was unbearable.

The market was a one-story that had partially collapsed. Several large woven baskets full of decaying fruits and vegetables sat out front, and as Jack approached the door, the smell of rotting sea food filled his mask. It was something of a welcome change.

The inside was dark and musty, and they brought out their flashlights. The pungent smell of mold joined the rotting fish. “Water first, then canned foods. Fruits, vegetables, meat. Dried goods are fine. Build a pile by the door, and we’ll load up when Nikitin and... Chase find a car.”

Something made a dull clank on the far side of the room. “Did you hear that?” one of them asked.

“Just some rubble falling,” the other answered.

Jack wasn’t so sure. He motioned to stop, then put his finger in front of his mask. Hartnell and Cozar took the hint and quieted down.

He pulled the flare gun from its makeshift holster and unlatched the safety. He wasn’t confident it would even sting one of the invaders, but it was better than nothing. He hoped it was better than nothing.

Another clank sounded, and some cans clattered to the floor. There was the sound of something scurrying. Voices?

Jack advanced along one wall and motioned for the others to take the opposite side. Their flashlights danced along shelves as they moved in on the source of the noise. Jack raised his own flashlight with the flare gun at its side and found... nothing.

He muttered, “What the hell’s going on here?”

The other two were standing opposite him now, shoulders shrugged and heads on a swivel. What was he missing?

There was another sound. Whispering? “Does anyone else hear that, or did I pick a bad time to start hallucinating?”

“I hear it,” Cozar said.

“Me too,” added Hartnell while she took a step forward. “Seems to be coming from the floor, chief. Hard to tell with this damned mask on, though.”

Jack took a good look at the floor. It was hard to make things out in the circle of his flashlight, so he started scanning around with it. There was a small carpet with a corner raised, and a circular patch of tiles suspiciously free of dust. “You may be on to something, Corpsman.”

He re-latched the gun’s safety and returned it to its holster, then lifted up the carpet. Beneath, he found a rectangular panel with a shiny metal handle.

“Trap door,” he said. “I think we have survivors.”

He didn’t want to say it for fear of getting his hopes up, but there it was. Survivors. He hadn’t seen anyone alive since the woman on the first day, and he didn’t want to think about that. Not ever again, if he could.

“Hold my flashlight,” he said as he shoved it into Cozar’s hand. Then he grabbed the handle and gave the door a good tug. It was heavier than he expected, but with a little effort, it opened and revealed a short wooden staircase leading into the darkness.

Something shifted in the shadows, and Jack heard breathing. He held out his hand and Cozar handed him the flashlight. For a second, he considered pulling the flare gun back out, but decided against it. If they were people, he didn't want to panic them. Panicked people were unpredictable. On the other hand, if this was a trap, he was already screwed.

He took two tentative steps into the cellar, and ducked his head down to have a look around. His flashlight swept the small storage room, and what he saw made his breath catch in his throat. A family of six huddled in the cellar, dressed in torn and dirty clothes. They were looking at him with wide eyes like he was the reaper come to claim them. A mother and father, teenage daughter, two sons and an infant. The baby was coughing, and the mother rocked him, whispering something into his ear over and over again.

Jack didn't know any Chinese beyond the names of entrées, and he even screwed those up half the time. Albright knew a little, but she was elsewhere.

"Hello?" he said.

No response.

He had another option. The Corps had developed a language so squads from different parts of the world could communicate on some basic level. It had a simple syntax and a small vocabulary, making it easy to learn, but severely limited. A corpsman could tell someone his job or where to go, but describing a movie plot would be next to impossible.

The Corps also made an effort to spread pamphlets around and offered free courses, with the goal of making it easier for corpsmen to communicate with refugees. "-Please be calm-" Jack said. "-I'm here to help-"

The children were sobbing, and their father tried to quiet them. No one reacted at all to what he said. Jack lifted his gas mask and tried again. "-I'm here to help. Do you understand me?-"

Nothing. He wasn't surprised. For all of the Corps' efforts, he'd never met a single person outside of the Corps who understood it. He thought it was worth a try, though, and suspected the ERC administration felt more or less the same way.

"We've got live ones. Hartnell, gather some cloth and water so we can improvise masks. Sunglasses or goggles also if you can find them."

It occurred to Jack that the poor folks couldn't see anything but his flashlight. In their position, he'd be scared witless too. He slid the flashlight's casing back and reconfigured it into a lantern, and the small

supply room was filled with dim light. "I'm here to help," he said in English, and motioned to the ERC patch on his shoulder.

Everyone around the world knew the symbol, two hands in a diamond, gripping each other at an angle as if one was helping the other up. The family recognized it, and this time, their reaction was instantaneous. Jack suddenly had two small boys hugging his legs, while the parents began to spew incomprehensible babble at him. The father was motioned to the mother, who in turn was propping up her still coughing infant. Jack didn't understand the words, but the message came through clearly.

He removed his work glove and motioned towards the child. The mother nodded, and he reached out and felt its head. He wasn't being particularly scientific, but the baby felt warm to the touch, and its eyes were red. That was enough to tell Jack he was out of his league.

"Cozar, get Albright and bring her back. Tell her we've got an infant with a fever and a cough."

"Roger," Cozar said, and he took off running. That was the right reaction. Jack was always glad to see a corpsman pound dirt when given a task.

The parents were still heatedly telling him something, and the father was making all kinds of motions with his hands, but the gestures didn't help at all. He hoped whatever they were trying to tell him wasn't too important.

He put his hand on the father's shoulder and said, "It's going to be okay," in a reassuring voice. "There's a doctor on the way, and we're going to get you out of here." The father didn't understand a word of it, but saying it made Jack feel better.

He peeled the small boys from his legs, then crouched down and took a good look at each. Their faces were dirty and they were frightened, but they looked healthy. The younger of the two had a quivering lip, and his eyes were wet with tears. He had to be six or seven years old, and he was trying as hard as he could not to cry.

"Don't sweat it, buddy," Jack said. "You're both very brave little kids. After what you've been through, you're allowed to cry, okay." It didn't matter that they couldn't understand him. He tousled the boy's hair and gave him a pat on the shoulder.

The girl was standing in the far corner, shivering and focused on her feet. Jack had done enough rescues to know that was normal, and he also

knew better than to bother her. Teenage girls tended to react better to women after trauma, and he decided to leave her be.

A minute later, Albright came down the stairs at full sprint with her medkit in hand. She said something in Chinese and went directly to examining the infant. She raised her mask to get a better look, and Jack could see sheer amazement all over her face. It was the face of a lottery winner. Albright always had a special affinity for children, and this put her on top of the world.

She learned what she needed quickly then took a look at the other children. “Nothing too serious,” she said as she worked, “The little guy’s just having a bad reaction to the mold and dust. Should be fine once we get him out of here.”

Jack breathed a sigh of relief. That was exactly what he needed to hear. He was desperate for a win, and he got one. “Can you tell ‘em we’re bringing a car?”

“Dream on,” she said. “I know how to say I’m a doctor, order the general’s chicken, and ask for the toilet, but that’s the full extent of my Chinese.”

“That’s okay. We’ll figure something out,” he said. “We always do.”

Hartnell stopped at the top of the steps with her arms full of cloth, water and cheap sunglasses. “I got what you asked for, chief.”

That’s when it happened; Jack was filled with a feeling he hadn’t had in more than a week. If these people had survived, then so had others. Possibly many others. He had a reason to be there in that wasteland, and more importantly, he had something to look forward to besides another heap of corpses.

He had hope, and it was the single most precious thing in the world.

Chapter 18:

The Silk Road

Back when he first saw aliens piling up the dead, Jack retreated. His body was stuck there in the remains of China, but his head ran all the way back home to the comfort of his girlfriend's arms, where it stayed while his body persisted on. He did what was necessary to survive, but only in a dim, mechanical daze. He was an animated corpse that had forgotten to fall.

Then he found a family of survivors, and everything changed. The discovery filled him with a ray of hope that brought him back to life. From that point on, he was fully charged up and firing on all cylinders because it wasn't just about survival anymore; it was about saving lives, and that meant everything to him.

It woke all of them up.

Nikitin and Chase returned with a delivery van which had carried more than its fair share of fish, by the smell of things. No one liked the stink, but the vehicle was spacious and all in one piece, so they spent the rest of the afternoon cleaning it up and packing it full of supplies. By the end of the night, the van was stocked with enough food and water for a month, and still had space left over for a makeshift medical bay.

The next day, they added two more cars to their collection. The first was a minivan for the family of survivors, retrofitted with a few good layers of grating over its vents. It had all the amenities, including a plush interior and an audio deck loaded full of Chinese pop.

The second vehicle was a beaten up and rusty old jeep that'd seen better days. Nikitin was adamant about having an off-road vehicle for scouting purposes, and the jeep was the best he could find. Or so he said. Jack suspected Nikitin had a soft spot for beaten up and rusty old jeeps, which he refused to admit to.

On the third day, they mounted up and hit the road as the winds began once again to rise. Jack and Nikitin rode ahead in the jeep where they both took a serious sandblasting in the open air. It was worse than they'd expected, and at every stop, they layered on more spare clothing until they both looked like mummies. The extra layers made the ride survivable, if not particularly comfortable.

The jeep scouted ahead by a paltry fifty meters most of the time, while the others trundled along behind them with their headlights on. It was slow going at first, but roads proved to be in excellent condition and they picked up speed. They traveled two hundred kilometers in that first week, and Jack suspected they could cover more ground if they wanted to.

They stopped to check for supplies and survivors at every settlement and the search was well worth the effort. They found plenty of both, and their small group sprouted into a motorcade. Survivors started coming out to meet them, drawn out of hiding by the sounds of car engines and human voices shouting over the roar. The motorcade swelled into a mass migration in time, their population numbering in the thousands, in a pattering line of cars that stretched across a kilometer of road.

Every influx brought another handful of orange jumpsuits, stocked up and ready for duty. Many spoke multiple languages including English, and they found constant work translating. The local guides were also plentiful, although each one delivered the same morbid warning: don't bother with the cities. There was nothing to find there but death.

They traveled for more than two straight months past the ruins of towns whose names Jack would never know, at the foot of the great mountains to the North which they only saw in silhouette. Always headed westward, they passed from China to Myanmar, then along the northern border between India and Nepal, and finally through Pakistan where they met up several more groups like their own.

As they neared the end of Pakistan, they finally caught sight of a city. Where Peshawar had been, there was a black and still smoking petrified forest, with a thick layer of shattered concrete lining the ground and the twisted steel skeletons of buildings standing in for trees. A power capable of such total destruction was unthinkable. They skirted the edge of the ash heap faster than common sense might have suggested, and as they headed for the mountains, no one bothered to look back.

In single file, they entered the Khyber Pass, which Jack had once heard described as a knife-wound in the mountains. The words hadn't meant much to him, but they were all too appropriate once he saw the steep gash as if the earth had simply been sliced away. The pass had been used by armies since the beginning of time, and he wondered how it would be remembered from then on, having carried so many survivors away from that terrible destruction.

As they emerged on the other side of the mountains, the travelers saw the most wonderful thing they'd ever seen. After more than two months in dust-choked twilight, they could finally see the bright blue sky again. They were back on Earth.

At the other end of the pass was a village built of sand-colored stone which rose up out of the landscape like a natural formation. It was part of the land, and Jack wondered if that was what had spared it from the onslaught. The village was whole, intact and full of people, and along the road stood a handful of soldiers in desert camouflage with assault rifles slung over their shoulders. For the first time Jack could remember, he was glad to see soldiers. Overjoyed, in fact.

With the fish van behind him, Jack pulled the jeep over and killed the engine, then he peeled off his gas-mask. He took one giant lung full of clean air. Fresh, reasonably dust free air. He held it as long as he could, and the feeling was amazing. As he took the second deep breath, he heard Nikitin doing the same beside him.

In another moment, he pulled off all his extra layers and tossed them in the back seat, until he was down to just the jumpsuit. He felt naked, and he was quickly struck by how bad he smelled.

"I was starting to worry the whole world was choked up with that cloud of shit," Nikitin said. "Would you look at this, though. It didn't even make it over the Hindu Kush."

"Unbelievable," Jack said as he stretched. He felt the overwhelming urge to curl up on the nearest rock and take a long nap. To sun himself like a lizard.

A soldier marched up to the jeep. He was a young man, a couple years younger than Jack, but moved like a seasoned veteran. The markings on his uniform were Mashriq Coalition, a union of middle-eastern nations that was had helped found the United Earth Organization. The Mashriq Coalition was always fighting separatists somewhere in its territory, and one could always any given soldier had seen his share of action.

"More orange jumpsuits?" The soldier said in disbelief. His English carried the slightest trace of an accent. "Every time we think we've seen the last of you, more come through that pass with another pack of refugees. They've all been Chinese and Indian, though. Where are you from, my friends?"

Jack was glad to hear they weren't the first group, and he guessed they wouldn't be the last either. "Pacific States Alliance," he said, "San Jose. Our tranzat went down over Szechuan province, and we've been hoofing it ever since."

"You're quite a way from home. Tell me, can anything kill you oranges?"

"Nothing yet," Nikitin said with a smile and they laughed. Jack could always count on Nikitin for bravado, if nothing else.

"So, where do we go next?" Jack asked. He was trying to recall the local organization from his last trip to Afghanistan. "Is there a refugee camp in Jalalabad, or do we truck all the way to Kabul?"

The soldier laughed again. That couldn't be a good sign. "You're a rare one, to be so optimistic after a march through hell. There is no Jalalabad or Kabul. The entire Mashriq is in ruins. The whole world, if what I hear is true."

Jack hoped he'd somehow misunderstood the soldier. "Come on... The UEO must be coordinating something."

"Perhaps I was not clear. The UEO is gone, friend. Everything's been burnt to ash, and there's no one left to run anything. There are only refugees like you and me."

Jack felt like he was on the receiving end of a cruel joke. "Everything? Europe? North America?"

"Everything. A pair of Blade Valkyries just returned from North America, and they say its the same there as everywhere."

"Son of a bitch," Nikitin said.

"Where do we go?" Jack asked again, but it was hardly a question. He closed his eyes and saw the ghosts of his life back home, a life that was already dead and gone. His beautiful Jessica was there in the pale light of an approaching storm, waiting for him to come home. Waiting for him to ask a question to which she'd already said yes. She told him that she would always be there waiting for him, and he refused to let the promise go. He had survived against all odds, and she must have survived too. Somehow.

When he opened his eyes, the ghosts were gone.

"You have two choices," the soldier said. "The first is to head for the North, as many others have. There are rumors of enclaves sprouting up in Russia around their Ark. I wouldn't be surprised to hear the same about the other two, but who knows."

The Ark Project had been started a couple decades before, but never totally finished; it turned into such a massive boondoggle that folks wondered if the GAF was running the show. The Arks themselves were huge underground shelters to be used in the event of a planet killer asteroid, each designed to hold a few million people indefinitely. They were located far off the equator to maximize their distance from potential impact zones, or that was the official story, at least. Jack always thought their locations suspect, likely influenced by politics and money. There were three, one each in Russia, Canada and Australia.

It made a lot of sense to try and reorganize there.

The soldier pointed out across the thousands of cars coming through the pass. “That’s what I would recommend for most of them. There’s life there, and maybe some kind of future.”

“And the other option?” Nikitin asked.

“Join our struggle and give the infidels hell. I know that most of you oranges are hard set against violence, but perhaps the situation is different now? I can see that you are survivors, and I’m sure your skills would find use.”

“What struggle?” Jack asked. “You said everything’s gone.”

The soldier laughed yet again. Jack was starting to think that he and the soldier had very different senses of humor. “You are so fast to lay down your arms, American. Your people have never been invaded, have they? You see, in my world, invasion is all we’ve ever known. It is our entire history. First the Greeks, then the Indians, the English, Soviets, Americans, and Indians once again. This land has been invaded a thousand times already, and it will be invaded a thousand more. When the smoke clears and these invaders are gone, who do you think will remain?”

The soldier’s rhetorical question was met with silence, and he smiled.

“They have taken Africa as their own, and we will force them out however we can. The Mashriq is our front-line, and soldiers of every flag are united in the struggle. Mashriq Coalition, your Blade and Carbon corporations, and more Mujahidin than can be counted. UEO and separatists standing together... isn’t that something? Soon, the oil will begin to flow, and the war will truly begin. Of course, we could always use more help.”

More help. That phrase made it sound so innocuous, like they needed an extra hand raising a barn or passing out fliers. Still, Jack knew the soldier

was right. This wasn't a petty political disagreement. It wasn't a conflict of ideologies. The enemy was here to exterminate the human race, and resistance was the only option.

“Should you decide to join us, there is an airfield south of Jalalabad that we use. Transports leave everyday. They will take you to our forward base.”

Jack closed his eyes again, but before he could see the ghosts of his past, his decision was already made.

Chapter 19:

The Distant Shore

Midday on Mars. The sun shone brightly, but a sandstorm was brewing on the horizon, hazing the line where dusty ground met rusty sky. Somewhere over that horizon lurked the biggest mountain anyone had ever seen, rising thirty kilometers into the emaciated sky, but no one would ever believe it was a mountain while standing on it. Its body stretched over an area the size of France, with a grade nearly as steep as a wheelchair ramp.

Amira Saladin was a teenager the first time she made the trip with her parents. They pointed at the ground and told her she was on the peak of the tallest mountain in the solar system. At the time, she didn't believe a word of it. Fifteen years and more than a dozen return trips later, she still found it difficult to believe. It was a let down, actually.

She eyed the approaching storm with a touch of annoyance. "Just another beautiful day on the Arcadian Plain."

Kazuo Nagai's voice came in over her headset. "Cry me a river, Sal. You love it out here. I know it, and you know it. Now stop working your jaw and gimme a hand with this."

She estimated an hour or more before the storm would hit, time enough to get their work done with ease. She was also pretty sure she outranked Kazuo, so she kept moving at her own leisurely pace. At least, she thought she outranked him. As she watched the coming storm, she wondered if anyone really understood the GAF chain of command.

Sal turned back toward the wall of the Ares Colony, where Kazuo was impatiently holding up a half-tonne composite steel panel. His powered environment suit, called a MASPEC, made him look like the bastard offspring of a man and a forklift, and the forklift had more dominant genes. Sal made a mental note to do something about the suits' aesthetics once she got all the bugs worked out.

She marched over and grabbed the other end of the panel, and together they carried it to the side, revealing the bare innards of the atmosphere processor beneath. The compartment was full of ducting and jumbled wires. She hated electronic spaghetti. "Remind me to chew out whoever left this mess. It's like they never heard of cable ties."

“Probably your father’s work.”

“Shut up.”

Kazuo flicked on his shoulder lamp and hunkered down in front of the compartment. “Which board is it?”

“Jay five. The rack with the bright red error light.”

“I’m color blind, Sal. I’ve told you at least a hundred times.”

“And it’s funny every single time,” she said without malice.

Kazuo selected the screwdriver attachment on his wrist tool, and went to work on the screws which held the circuit board in place. “Tell me something interesting about Mars,” he said while he worked.

Sal pulled the replacement board out of her pack. “Alright. Did you know that in ancient times, Mars was inhabited by a race of intelligent tiger-lizard men?”

“Is that so?”

“Absolute fact. Although their civilization collapsed, a few of them survived into modern times, and around the turn of the century, they assisted human efforts to explore the red planet by wiping off the rovers’ solar panels at night while the machines were powered down.”

“Amazing,” Kazuo said. He handed her the burnt out board, and she gave him the replacement. “Now, what exactly is a tiger-lizard man?”

“They’re basically like normal lizard men, but with jaunty stripes and cheerier attitudes.”

Kazuo gave the replacement board a healthy nudge to make sure it was properly seated, then went about screwing it in. “That makes some crazy sort of sense, I guess. Wait... Last week, didn’t you tell me Mars was originally colonized by little green men with fat heads? There are shenanigans afoot.”

Sal gave the faulty board a quick once over, looking for any obvious signs of failure like a burnt capacitor, but there weren’t any. She’d have to take a closer look in the lab once they got back. “No shenanigans. The little green men, the Quazlpacti as they were called, were the first to colonize Mars, and they brought the tiger-lizards with them as pets. Unfortunately, they didn’t foresee the mutagenic plague which, in a fit of poetic justice, turned them into docile pets and the tiger-lizards into their cruel masters.”

“Fascinating,” Kazuo said. “We’re ready to seal up here.”

Sal packed the faulty circuit board away and then lifted the steel panel up. “It was the Quazlpacti who left the Nazca Lines on Earth, you know.”

“To warn us against the dreaded gas monkeys of Jupiter, right?”

“Nope. Just graffiti. The Quazlpacti were jerks.”

Kazuo stood and turned to give her a hand with the panel, but stopped and put his hands on his hips instead. His posture positively radiated frustration, and Sal was once again amazed at how much subtle body language made it through the bulk of the powered suits.

“You’re holding that panel up by yourself? You weren’t going to experiment on production units anymore, damn it.”

She laughed. “I wasn’t experimenting. It’s just a little performance tweak.”

“Tweak my ass,” Kazuo said. “The suit’s only rated to lift half that weight.”

She walked past him and lowered the panel over the exposed compartment, then punched the pressure seals into place. “I wrote the spec, thanks. No need to quote it to me.”

“That’s not the point. It’s not safe, Sal. What if your ‘tweaks’ fail and five hundred kilos of steel come tumbling down on you? What then?”

“Then my stalwart yet officious partner digs me out and carries me back to the airlock.” She gave Kazuo a nudge in the ribs, which he certainly didn’t feel. “Those are the dangers of frontier engineering, soldier boy. Better get used to it.”

With the panel sealed up, they both marched back toward the eastern airlock at a pace much slower than their suits were capable of. After a long silence, Kazuo said, “You’re really aggravating, you know that?”

“Of course I know it,” Sal replied. “It’s why you like me so dang much.”

Kazuo groaned, and Sal took it as a sign of affection. Kazuo wasn’t the kind to let his positive emotions bubble up to the surface, but it meant they burned twice as bright deep down inside. At least, that’s what Sal told herself while she continued to dig around for them.

By the time they reached the airlock, the sandstorm was still brewing in the distance, and hadn’t made much progress. Sal would’ve been delighted if it never bothered to come together at all. The sound of stones battering the colony’s outer shell always ruined her concentration in the lab.

The airlock doors closed behind them and the chamber began to pressurize, a process made agonizingly slow by obsolete, decrepit airlock hardware. The old tech did its job, though, and just well enough that Sal’s

requests for replacements from Earth were ignored. Since they were all mission critical systems, she wasn't even allowed to experiment on them. Not the slightest little bit.

"Tell me something interesting about Mars," Kazuo said, looking to kill time.

Sal's mind was still on those annoying, tiny little rocks. "Did you know that ninety percent of the rocks currently on Mars were brought here by the original colonists?"

"Is that so?" Kazuo asked.

"Absolute fact. The Martian landscape, as originally seen by the Viking probes, was mind numbingly boring, so the colonists brought rocks with them to liven up the scenery. A quarter of the colonists were landscapers by profession, and they spent the first three years carefully arranging them, like some kind of giant Zen garden."

"Incredible," he said. "What about the sandstorms?"

"Ruined all of their hard work over and over again, until they finally gave up trying."

The pressure was half-way there.

"Tell me something interesting about Earth," she said.

He took a moment to think. Kazuo wasn't the imaginative type, so he tended to answer with actual, interesting facts. Or things he thought were interesting, but often times weren't. "Did you know..." he droned out as he tried to think of something, "that when Yuri Gagarin first orbited Earth, the Great Wall of China was the only man-made structure visible from space."

"I did know that."

"Oh."

"And it's not true."

"Damn."

An uncomfortable silence persisted until the green pressure light came on and the internal doors parted, revealing the mission readiness bay. The oblong room was filled with standard GAF pressure suits hanging on racks, as well as a half-dozen of Sal's MASPEC powered suits, which faced the wall with their backs open.

Sal and Kazuo marched inside and each stepped up to a mechanical docking clamp, which held MASPECs while their pilots climbed out. A person wasn't strong enough to remain upright once the suit powered down,

and attempts to escape were quite comical when they didn't result in serious injury.

Sal pulled herself out of the back of her suit and retrieved the faulty circuit board from its hip-pack while Kazuo was still going step-by-step through the power-down procedure. As usual, she found his tenacious grip on procedure endearing in a ridiculous sort of way.

Her comm headset rang. "Yeah?"

"Hey Sal, it's Rachael. Are you back yet?"

That was Rachael Peretz, a communications operator who—like Sal—had come to Mars as a child with the first wave. Sal had babysat her once upon a time, and they were close friends now. She silently hoped this wasn't another gab session about the cute sounding boy on the Shackleton Expedition. She didn't think she'd survive another one of those.

"Just climbed out of my suit. What's up?"

"Something weird. Can you come to the Comm Center and give me a hand?"

A technical mystery. Sal considered it a minor blessing. "I'll be there in five. Saladin out."

She snatched the duty jacket from her locker and took off on an Ares sprint. With gravity only a third of Earth's, the Martian colonists had learned to run upwards of forty kilometers an hour, and jump several times their own height. It was one of the skills that separated long time colonists like Sal from more recent transplants like Kazuo, who'd dislocated his shoulder several times trying.

Sal flew through one corridor after the next, and then started braking by leaning back and scraping her feet along floor. The motion was rather like skidding down a long hill. She came to a perfect stop in front of the Comm Center door, and it slid open in front of her.

"Hey, what's going on, Rache?"

Rachael waved her over, and Sal stepped up to her friend's workstation. The screen showed a graph of a waveform drawn in sharp right angles. It was a digital signal. "Alright. What am I looking at?"

"It all started two days ago. The infra-red receiver blacked out, and at first, we thought it might be solar flare interference, but then it started to happen regularly. Each blackout lasted forty-five minutes, followed by the receiver returning to normal operation for forty-five."

"Weird."

“Yeah, I thought so too. Some of us thought it might be a software problem, or a piece of equipment faulting out.”

“But it wasn’t?”

“Nope. Turns out, we’re being hit by an infra-red laser that’s overloading the photodiode. And get this... it’s coming from Earth.”

Earth. No one was talking about it anymore. They hadn’t heard anything from home for more than two months. At first they assumed it was some minor technical problem, or a bout of nasty solar weather. Then, as the silence stretched on, theories of all sorts started to fly, from a nuclear war to some kind of global communications collapse caused by terrorists. Then the conversation just died. There was no way to know what was going on, so they stopped trying to guess.

“Once we tuned down the receiver’s sensitivity, I started analyzing the beam, and I found this signal embedded inside.” She pointed to the screen.

“And you think someone’s trying to talk to us?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure. I haven’t been able to decode it, though. I was hoping you’d take a look.”

Sal realized her jaw was hanging open. She closed her mouth and stared at the screen for a moment, and tried not to imagine what it could mean. “Yeah. I’ll do that,” she said. “Add me to the comms working group, and I’ll take a crack at it.”

“Thanks,” Rachael said, “and until we know what’s going on, let’s keep this quiet, alright? No need to panic anyone.”

“Sure thing,” Sal said, and she stayed for several long minutes, watching the peaks and troughs of the signal stretch across the screen.

Chapter 20:

A Call to Arms

Marcus Donovan was deep inside Legacy's secondary hull, her factory complex. From the observation platform where he stood, he looked out over a cavernous chamber lit in blue-green and filled everywhere with activity. The Shackleton Explorer was there, docked inside a series of orange constructor rings whose countless biomechanical arms twitched about and inspected the vessel. Legacy wanted to know more about human technology, and they both agreed the most direct route was to take a closer look. Faulkland was against it at first, but after six weeks of constant badgering, he finally caved and reluctantly allowed his boat to be brought inside.

The last of Shackleton's crew moved to more comfortable quarters aboard Legacy, although the engineering team maintained a presence on the Shackleton to monitor its nuclear reactor. The chief engineer, Olli Enqvist, insisted the reactor was perfectly safe and could operate itself, but he preferred to err on the side of caution. Marcus smelled subtext.

All the while, Legacy was in a state of transformation. She had been quiet and despondent when she woke up, but the crew's presence raised her spirits. Marcus didn't completely understand it, but humans invigorated her somehow. She had been incomplete without them; now she was filled with purpose and an eagerness to please.

Legacy's factory especially had become a constant hub of activity. She quickly constructed a small fleet of utility vessels shaped like pill-bugs, which the miners called tugs and adopted as their own. With the miners as their pilots, the tugs swarmed out to assay and retrieve asteroids, feeding them to the factory complex which hungrily digested tonne after tonne of ore. This led to the construction of yet more tugs, some of which joined in acquiring minerals, while others went about repairing Legacy's hull.

Repairs across Legacy were moving faster than anyone expected, thanks primarily to the efforts of Juliette St. Martin, whose insights into the alien technology were unmatched by any of the engineers. Legacy's internal systems more closely resembled biological structures than they did machines, and healing her was more like medicine than car-repair. Being an

exceptional physician with plenty of experience and a keen interest in alien biology, Juliette was the perfect woman for the job.

Marcus suspected Juliette and Legacy were bonding in ways he never could, and the ship all but confirmed it. She was in fact growing quite fond of the doctor, and Marcus felt a twinge of jealousy which he realized was utterly absurd. The most confounding part was that he couldn't figure out which of the two he was more jealous of.

The rest of the team were busy adapting their equipment to Legacy by trial and error. Mostly error. The ship learned to produce compatible electrical outlets after a bit of practice, so power wasn't an issue, but all attempts to mate their computers to her information network failed. They were forced instead to setup their systems in tandem with hers, including a comm system which she essentially ferried signals to and from. Rao likened it to visiting a cutting edge radio-telescope and then being forced to use one's own Victorian spyglass.

As Marcus stood there in the factory watching the machines do their work, Legacy repeated a request which she'd made a dozen times already. She explained that whole swaths of her memory had faded during her eons-long slumber, and she needed new patterns to fill in the gaps. Specifically, she wanted to dismantle the Shackleton and analyze its construction. She was sure she could interface with the crew more easily if she could better mimic their technology.

Marcus had done his best to put the decision off, but she was becoming more insistent. The honest truth was that the decision wasn't his to make, though; the Shackleton wasn't his ship. And even though he was now a permanent resident aboard Legacy, he doubted the rest of the crew were so enthusiastic about the idea. Dismantling the Shackleton would mean total commitment, and there could be no turning back.

"Alright, I'll ask him," Marcus said. He closed his eyes, looked around for Faulkland's position, and received a picture of the Commander seated in one of the recreation facilities. They were like indoor parks, complete with simulated sun, wind and sky, and the crew had become enamored with them. The ship was also working on artificial grass, and by all reports was getting damned good at it.

Marcus spoke, and the ship echoed his voice at the Commander's location. "Donovan to Faulkland, please meet me in the Shackleton's docking bay."

Then he leaned over the railing and waited, watching the constructor rings' arms gingerly probe the Shackleton's surface. Less than a minute later he heard the whoosh of the transit tube, followed by the dull clack of Faulkland's boots on the hard floor.

"What's on your mind, Marc?"

Faulkland was a straight shooter, and Marcus figured it best to come straight out. "She wants to dismantle the Shackleton."

"Hell no."

"Fair enough. I told her you'd say that, but she still wanted me to ask. She wants to improve how she interacts with us, and she thinks the most direct way would be to tear the Shackleton down and replicate its interfaces."

Faulkland leaned over the railing next to Marcus, and he too watched the small insectoid arms examine his ship's hull. "Do you know how long I had to wait to get my own explorer? I ran freight to the moon and back for ten years, Marc, then Mars for another three just to get my name on the list. This ship's the only thing I ever wanted."

"I know," Marcus said, "and she's a beauty. Best we ever built."

"Don't exaggerate. Seed I... now that was a piece of work. Brought a whole dang colony to Mars. I know it only had to do its job once, but man I woulda liked to be there to see it. Still amazed that it worked at all."

"You and me both. How about the best I ever built then?"

Faulkland laughed. "See, that's just it, Doc. The Shackleton's just another project to you, another toy for you to fix, wind-up and send along its merry way. You don't understand that she's my ship. She's my purpose."

For the first time in his life, Marcus was in a place to understand what that meant. He had no intention of moving on ever again, because he'd found his purpose and he was ready to spend the rest of his life aboard her. "This may surprise you, Commander, but I get it. I'm understanding it better every day."

Legacy understood, too. She considered the bond between ship and crew to be sacred. A crew was her purpose, her reason for being. A way to solve both of their problems occurred to her, and she passed it along to Marcus.

"She's wants to offer you something in return," Marcus said.

"I can't imagine what would make me change my mind."

Marcus turned towards him with an earnest look in his eyes. “How about a new a ship?”

“Come again?”

A number of faint memories flew through Marcus’ head, different ships of different types. “Once Legacy has adapted her systems for our use, she’s promised to build you a new Eireki cruiser. No more primitive fission reactor or spinner section. We’re talking about a hollow-drive powered, trans-atmospheric living ship with artificial gravity, able to make the trip from Earth to Mars in eight minutes flat.”

Faulkland was silent for a long time while he looked at his ship and considered. “Eight minutes to Mars?” he asked.

“Eight minutes.”

He turned to Marcus and motioned to his own temple. “I don’t need one of those things, do I?”

The neural interface on Marcus’ head had grown during the two months since it was attached, and the sight of it still disturbed the crew. He could hardly blame them. “No neural interface. That’s the point of pulling the Shackleton apart, right?”

“Good. I want to bond with a ship, but I don’t really want to ‘bond’ with a ship, if you catch my drift. I don’t need anyone else in my head.”

“So that’s a yes?” Marcus asked with a tentative smile.

“Yeah... just do it before I change my mind. I get input on the new ship’s design, too.”

“Of course,” Marcus said. “She wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Faulkland tapped his comm headset. “Faulkland to Enqvist, are you aboard the Shackleton?”

Marcus heard the transmission echo through his interface. “Yes, sir,” Enqvist said.

“Shut the reactor down, and then join us on Legacy.”

“Sir?”

“We’re scuttling the ship.”

“Roger. Does the big beast know how to deal with a hot reactor, sir?”

Faulkland looked to Marcus who nodded.

“Donovan claims she does. I’m inclined to believe him.”

“Aye aye, sir. Inserting control rods now. I’ll be out in five. Over and out.”

The Shackleton's running lights went out and true to his word, Enqvist came out four-and-a-half minutes later. He waved up at the platform, and the constructor rings' arms immediately began pulling the ship apart and examining each component. Faulkland grimaced, but didn't look away. "It's like watching a spider eat a fly."

Legacy checked Marcus' memory for images of spiders and was slightly offended at the comparison. Marcus didn't feel the need to pass that along.

Both men watched the carnage for several moments more, until an incoming message interrupted them. "Shen to Faulkland and Donovan. We've just received a priority encrypted transmission from Ares Colony with your names on it."

"On our way," Faulkland said. He continued to watch his ship's destruction for another second, then they both headed for the tube and left for the bridge. The trip took them from the factory to the primary hull and more than another kilometer to the bridge, all within thirty seconds, after which they were lowered down to the landing pad on the other side.

Faulkland marched double-time to Mason's station down on the second tier, while Marcus used the gravity systems to fly there directly. This new trick left a look of surprise on everyone's face.

"The transmission came straight from the office of the Colony Administrator, and requires both your biometric keys to decode. It's pretty big. Would you like it transferred to private quarters, sirs?"

"No need," Faulkland said, and placed his right hand on a lit pad where its measurements were scanned and converted into a decryption key. When he finished, Marcus did the same. A progress bar crawled across Mason's monitor, and then flashed to say it had finished.

"The archive contains two separate files: a brief message from Ares and another larger file labeled... Radio Free Copernicus?"

Marcus cocked an eyebrow. "Play the message from Ares," he said.

The screen went black and then showed Administrator Saladin, the greying but still potent head of Ares Colony, seated at his desk. The Great Seal of Mars was behind him, the Roman god of war posed triumphantly atop a caricature of Olympus Mons, motioning across the barren Martian plains. The administrator straightened his shirt and received a cue from someone off screen, then began. "This is a priority transmission to the heads of the Shackleton Expedition. As you're aware, Earth has been silent for the

past seventy-four days, and we've been monitoring the situation with cautious optimism. Today, we received and decoded a transmission that, if true, surpasses even our greatest fears.

"While we're still working to confirm its veracity, I've decided to send you an unaltered copy. We would appreciate any thoughts you and your specialists might have, and we patiently await your response. Be blessed." With that, the transmission ended.

"That was cryptic," Faulkland said.

"And ominous," Marcus added. "Mason, go ahead and load up the other file."

Mason tapped at the keyboard a couple times, and the other transmission began. This time, the screen showed a video feed of the Earth from orbit in crystal clear and excruciating detail. The northern edge of the Amazon was visible, as was the horribly defaced northern coast of South America. The former territories of Venezuela, Guyana and Suriname were blackened husks, as if some force had simply burnt them away.

Even more striking were the two blue circular structures that had taken root in the rainforest, each measuring nearly twenty kilometers across. Tendrils spread out from them, reaching into the embattled jungles which were being overtaken by some kind of orange and purple growth. It looked like an infection.

Legacy was noticeably silent in Marcus' head.

A voice accompanied the video feed, and Marcus thought it was familiar. "...from here, you can just barely see what remains of Trinidad. I went there for vacation last year, and lemme tell you, it was a hell of a time. Great food. Good music. I suppose I can go ahead and add that to the list places I'll never see again.

"And now for a station break. For those of you just joining us, this is Nils Jansen for Radio Free Copernicus, your eye in the sky in these troubling times. The footage is, as always, streaming live from our position three-hundred and twenty kilometers high above the Earth.

"But how did this happen? Well, it's a funny story. Actually, it's not really funny, but humor me... It all started about seventy-four days ago..."

Soon, all of the crew were on the bridge, and they watched the forty-five minute transmission from beginning to end in stunned silence. When it was over, they watched it again. As the second play-through finished, Faulkland asked the question on everyone's mind. "Is it the Nefrem?"

Marcus didn't know and Legacy was confused. The enemy shouldn't have had any reason to come to the Garden. The whole system should have appeared dead and uninteresting to them. She was sure of it. The invaders' craft and tactics were unfamiliar, too. Then again, a lot things can change in sixty-five million years.

"I don't know," he finally said. "Maybe. If it is, Legacy's not strong enough to engage them. Not yet. We need more time."

"What about the men on Copernicus?" Sarah Park asked. "They don't have much time left, sir."

Jansen had been clear about that fact. Their rations were running low, and he didn't know how much longer they could hold out. "We have to hope someone on Midway heard them. I'm sorry, but there's nothing else we can do."

Park didn't seem satisfied with that answer.

Marcus put his hand on Mason Shen's shoulder and said, "I want you to send a priority classified message to Administrator Saladin."

"What should it say, sir?"

"Transmission source confirmed and considered reliable. Shackleton Expedition now en route to Mars aboard new vessel. ETA three weeks. Tell them we aim to retake Earth, and to prepare for war."

Chapter 21:

Reunion

The old cargo plane brought them in under the cover of night. The world was just as black above as below in the absence of electrical light, and Jack had never before seen a darkness so deep or thick. So all consuming and complete. He slipped in and out of consciousness, each time troubled by the same dream. In it, he was adrift on a shiftless sea of black ink attached to an impossibly large tattoo needle which etched portraits of the dead on the world's aging, wrinkled skin.

Jack despised when his dreams waxed poetic. Why couldn't he have nice dreams about sunny beaches in Cancun?

After God only knew how long, the plane made a steep descent and then rumbled along a rough patch of road. When it came to a halt, the rear cargo ramp lowered and revealed the dim lights of civilization's last gasp.

The makeshift runway was lined with hooded lamp posts which lit the ground but were invisible from above, as well as the same oil drums, stacks of crates and wooden pallets found at every small airfield. There were soldiers spread everywhere, dressed in unmatched uniforms and carrying a motley assortment of small arms.

Mashriq soldiers in red berets jogged over to the plane and ushered its passengers down the ramp. Each spoke in a different language. "Welcome to Al Saif. This the base of the sword. Exit the vehicle and bring all of your belongings with you. You will not have another chance to retrieve them. New recruits report to the registrar at the far end of the airstrip. Welcome to Al Saif. This is the base of the sword..."

Jack, his corpsmen, and the cargo plane's other fifty bruised and dirty passengers hurried down the ramp and went where the soldiers' fingers directed. They found the registrar seated at a shabby desk at the end of the airstrip, and he was just another soldier but with a clipboard instead of a rifle. The recruits lined up single-file, were asked a few questions, then signed their names and were hustled along to the next stop.

Jack formed a theory that the enlistment, which involved constantly moving from one station to another, was intended to disorient them.

Combine that with their lack of sleep and empty stomachs, and the recruits were left in an exceptionally pliable state.

After an hour of being spun in circles, they found themselves on wooden benches inside of a long building made of spare corrugated metal. Harsh light came from lamps overhead, and the walls were decorated with posters in primary colors, depicting soldiers charging victoriously on cowering foes.

“This is the last damn place I ever expected to end up,” Jack said to Nikitin.

“Come on, Jackie-boy. Replace the soldiers in those pictures with medics and firefighters, and this ain’t so different from your first night in the Corps, is it?”

He thought back to the training camp in San Diego. He was a lot younger then, fresh faced and full of optimism, but the scene was just about the same. The ERC’s hall was bigger, its decorations more grandiose, but it was basically the same.

“Just you watch,” Nikitin said. “In about five minutes, some puffed up little Major will waltz up to that podium and start barking about the proud tradition of the organization. Then he’ll get all pissed off and make an example of someone. I hope it’s me. I never get to be the example.”

“Nik, you’re a constant example to us all,” Jack said, and Nikitin let out one of his belly laughs and jabbed at Jack’s shoulder.

Nikitin’s prediction came true two minutes early. A man in camo pants, combat boots and a brown tank-top marched up the center aisle. He had curly dark hair and several days worth of growth on his face. His dog-tags swung out from his chest and back again with each step, and he examined the recruits with bright wolfen eyes.

He walked to the front of the room, turned on his heel and just stood there for a long moment. It wasn’t clear whether he was gathering his breath, his thoughts, or just taking a moment to let everything sink in.

“Welcome to Al Saif,” he said finally. “I am Colonel Galili, and I’m in charge of new recruits here. First, I would like to thank each of you for coming. As you know, this is a desperate war we wage. A war that will determine the fate of our race. We will either regain our world, or we will perish and fade into the sands of history. This depends on you, and I’m glad to see so many of you pledging yourselves to the cause.”

Nikitin elbowed Jack in the ribs. "That's a little different," he whispered.

The colonel continued, "The invaders have struck a terrible blow to our people. Our cities are burnt. Our civilization is destroyed. What was is no more. Yet for all their strength, the enemy has made a grave oversight... They allowed us to survive. They destroyed our cities, and yet our spirit rages on, unvanquished and undying."

He motioned to someone in the first row. "You. Tell me why you're here tonight."

"To kill the bastards. I'm ready to die for the cause."

"I see," the colonel said. "Who else feels this way?"

Hands floated up around the room and voices murmured in agreement.

He shook his head. "Noble, but we cannot allow ourselves to think like this. It is the mindset of a victim. The victim is content to spit in his enemy's face before he dies. We must not be victims. Instead, we will become weapons. I ask you, is a weapon prepared to die? No. A weapon is a machine. It is cold, calculating and efficient. A weapon survives so that it may kill again tomorrow. That is its purpose.

"I know you are filled with anger and hatred, and you are willing to sacrifice your lives, but this must not be so. For the sake of our people, our mission must be greater than this. We must preserve ourselves... survive beyond the struggle, and not only destroy the enemy, but dominate them. We must drive them from our world, and show them the price of their arrogance.

"Now, it is true that we face an enemy of staggering power. The force which these invaders have brought against us is without precedent in the history of our world, yet they are not omnipotent. They can be defeated and killed. Can anyone tell me what strengths we possess?"

Galili's question met silence, and he smiled. "How about this? We have knowledge. This is our world, and we know her terrain, her weather, the hidden secrets of the land itself. That is a strength. Our enemy is large and rooted in place, while we are fluid and agile. When they believe they've found us in numbers, we will disperse and regroup. That is a strength. Our enemy is loud and obtuse, but we are quiet, subtle and cunning. That too is a strength."

The room was full of nodding heads.

“So you see, we have many strengths which the enemy cannot steal from us. Strengths which they cannot neutralize. We must exploit each strength to its fullest, and use them to destroy the enemy wherever he stands. Our victory then is not only attainable; it is inevitable.

“Harbor no doubts about this fact... we will be victorious. In our hearts and in our minds, we must look always toward victory, and we must seize every opportunity to strive closer to it.

“Are there any questions?”

A man somewhere in the middle of the room raised his hand, and Colonel Galili motioned to him. “When do we get to kill some damn spacemen?” he asked.

“Soon enough. You will train here for the next month, and then receive your assignments. Everyone with previous military experience will be fast tracked.”

The question and answer session went on for another twenty minutes, covering topics from weapons and organization to what was known about the invaders, which didn’t amount to much. When the activity began to quiet down, Jack had his own hand in the air.

Colonel Galili pointed to him. “Will we engage civilian targets?” Jack asked.

The colonel had to stop and think. It wasn’t a question he had a prepared answer for. “I’m not sure there even are civilians among them, to be honest. We have only seen their termination squads thus far. I see that you’re with emergency response. Would it bother you if we did?”

When Jack spoke, it was like the words came from someone else’s mouth. “No, sir.”

“Good. We cannot afford to show the enemy more compassion than he has shown us.” There were still hands in the air, but the colonel waved them off. “That’s enough for one night. The sergeant outside will show you all to a warm meal and a bunk, and we’ll pick up in the morning. That is all.”

The exhausted recruits stood up from the benches and slowly shuffled out the door, Jack and his team trailing at the back of the crowd. The air outside was cool and crisp, and there was a gentle wind blowing. He was glad to be outdoors again.

A Carbon Corporation sergeant stood off to the side, waving the recruits on toward the mess hall, every centimeter of him an example of Carbon’s commitment to technological warfare. He wore a suit of their standard

charcoal-black armor, made from an impact-resistant polymer that was the source of Carbon's vast wealth, as well as a bulky helmet covered in optics and air filters. Slung over his shoulder was a Blade Firearms XM-5 assault rifle decked out with all the options. Even banged up and covered in a layer of dust, his equipment was the envy of armies the world over.

As Jack approached, the sergeant unexpectedly stepped up and stopped him with a quick shove to the chest. His other hand reached back to his rifle, ready to bring the weapon forward. "Where do you think you're going, Corpsman?" he asked. The helmet modulated his voice and made it sound inhuman and mechanical. "I'm detaining you under suspicion of sedition."

Jack was too tired for this shit. He shook his head and readied a string of expletives, but before he could unload them, he noticed something strange: the nametag beside the double-crescent Carbon Corporation logo said Hernandez.

"What the... Charlie?"

The sergeant popped his helmet's latch and levered the face-mask up, revealing Charlie Hernandez' mischievous smirk inside. "Bro, you shoulda seen the look on your face."

"You son of a bitch," Jack said, and before he knew it, his arms were wrapped tight around his little brother. He couldn't remember ever hugging Charlie. Not by choice, at least. He guessed that was a sign of just how much the world had changed.

They pulled away after a few seconds, and Charlie gave him a friendly punch to the shoulder. "How the fuck did you survive, Jack?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you. We crashed in China..."

"Don't be modest," Nikitin said. "Your big brother saved our cans back there. Landed a half-destroyed leviathan smack dab in the middle of the invasion."

"China? No joke," Charlie said. "Man, I haven't heard anything good coming out of the east."

"Nothing good to say," Jack said. "It's hell over there. How about you?"

"Long story," Charlie said. His hands became animated as he spoke. "We were hip deep in the shit fifty clicks outside of Cairo when it started. We had some insurgents pinned down, and then the damndest thing happened. Four hundred guys in a firefight stopped shooting and just looked up at the sky, like someone hit pause."

“Next thing you know, the fight didn’t seem so important anymore. We called a cease fire, and ended up trading war stories with ‘em all night.”

“And you came back here?”

“Yeah. Aliens are thick as locusts to the South, so... well, we advanced to the rear and didn’t stop until we hit the Dead Sea. Probably just dumb luck, but soldiers from all over hell were already here, and Al Saif just sorta happened.”

Charlie looked the group up and down. “Anyway, we’ve got plenty of time to catch up, but you guys look like crap. Let’s get you a warm meal and some bunks, eh?”

Charlie was right. They looked like crap, and they felt twice as nice. Together, they went to the mess hall laughing, and Jack’s team ate the first warm meal they’d seen in months.

Chapter 22:

Red Carpet

“They said ‘aboard new vessel’? Whaddya think that means?”

Sal had tapped into the orbital traffic system, and she was watching her monitor for any kind of strange activity. She didn’t bother to look away as she answered him. “I’ll tell you what I’ve been telling my father for the past three weeks, Kaz. I don’t fucking know.”

The lab was quiet and dim, just the way she liked it. Other than her monitor, the only light in the room came from a series of faintly blue neons hanging over the large worktable. That table was covered in tools and small bits of mechanical flotsam and jetsam, pieces of experiments in various states of completion. Other larger projects in various states of assembly were arrayed along the walls.

Kazuo was leaning against Sal’s desk, idly toying with the gears of a broken servo which occasionally let out a whir. “I mean, where could they even get a new vessel? I bet the expedition was just a cover for a secret military project.”

Sal reached out and snatched the servo from his hands, then set it down next to her keyboard. “Maybe, but the Foundation wouldn’t have any part of that. They take non-proliferation seriously.”

“Sure, but what if they were conned. The way they changed the Shackleton’s mission all of a sudden smelled mighty fishy to me. Maybe Donovan works for Blade Aerospace.”

Sal considered what she knew about Donovan and his Gypsies. He’d become one of Sal’s heroes over the past few years for his ability to get jobs done despite bureaucracy’s best efforts. He was a divisive figure in the Foundation for precisely the same reason, and there were always rumors flying around about him. But this was the first time she’d heard anyone accuse him of working for a military contractor. It was damn near heresy.

Kazuo had been a Carbon Corp soldier before he came to Mars though, and nobody slung conspiracy theories like military men. Every single one she’d met saw hints of secret dealings wherever he looked, and that fact disturbed her to no end.

“Let me see if I’ve got this right. You think that Marcus Donovan, a well known and respected astronomer, was hired by Blade to construct an experimental, not to mention illegal, warship in Earth orbit?”

“Plus or minus. Just tossin’ ideas at the wall, seeing what sticks.”

Sal was badly in need of an aspirin. “I guess that makes as much sense as anything else these days.”

The one thing she knew for certain was that this new vessel had to be fast, whatever it was. Fast enough to cross two-hundred and thirty million kilometers in three weeks. She was familiar with the Shackleton’s engines, and the ship just wasn’t up to snuff. It would need to accelerate for more than three straight hours to achieve that kind of velocity, and there was no way it could carry enough reaction mass. The math just didn’t add up.

Not that it was any easier to believe Kazuo’s theory. An advance in propulsion technology that revolutionary would be impossible to hide. The cost, the complexity, the testing. There would be too many people involved and it was just too big to cover up.

That was the thought running through Sal’s head when the alerts started to sound. Red lights and klaxons went off across the colony, and Kazuo jumped out of his skin. “What the hell’s going on?”

“God damn it!” Sal shouted over the noise, and she punched the keyboard. “Incoming asteroid. Big and hot.”

“What do we do?”

She shook her head. “Pray,” was all she said.

The blip streaked across the display and she watched it with wide eyes. It had to be ten kilometers long or more, and was coming at them like a bullet. It was a planet killer, and they should have seen it years ago. Her breath caught in her throat and her thoughts were eerily silent. Wasn’t she supposed to see her life flash before her eyes in a situation like this?

Then, as suddenly as it appeared, the object slowed to around two kilometers per second and dropped into orbit around Mars.

Sal started to breathe again. Kazuo was standing behind her with his fingers digging into her shoulders. “What just happened?” he asked.

“I’m not sure,” she said, “but I hope that’s Donovan’s new vessel.”

It took ten minutes for someone to finally shut the alarms off, much to Sal’s chagrin. She still hadn’t found any aspirin, and her head was thumping something fierce. Another five minutes later, the colony received its first

message from the object in orbit, confirmation that the massive thing was in fact Marcus Donovan's new vessel. Somehow.

Donovan requested permission to land a small craft at Ares, and after a heated debate among the senior staff, permission was granted. The situation was too strange not to proceed with caution, though, and even if they were short on weaponry, the colonists decided that a show of strength was in order. Sal and Kazuo were chosen for the task.

Thirty minutes after first contact, Sal found herself in the southern mission readiness bay giving her MASPEC a quick inspection, with Kazuo on the opposite side of the room doing the same. Five other maintenance workers were pulling on pressure suits, a collection of aged and dusty rifles waiting beside them. It was a decidedly half-assed combat squad.

The bulky armor stood in front of her, the hinged panels of its back splayed apart like the petals of a mechanical lily, revealing the padded cavity within. It bridged the gap between suit and vehicle, giving its pilot the strength and durability of a machine, but Sal had never considered using them as weapons. They were an answer to a problem and nothing more — the efficient combination of worker and construction equipment in one tidy package.

She keyed in the power-up code then grabbed the rails above the docking clamp, lifted her legs up and lowered them inside. Once in up to her waist, she put her arms out in front of her and levered herself into the cavity, allowing her hands to slide all the way through to the ends of the mechanical arms. The MASPEC detected that she was safely inside, and it adjusted its own padding and braces to fit snugly, then closed and sealed the rear hatch.

Kazuo was ahead of her for once. Her docking clamp had just released while he was already taking a few warm-up steps, the heavily booted feet of his suit making hollow clanks that echoed throughout the bay.

She stepped away from the clamp and turned, and the rest of her impromptu squad stood at attention. "Everyone sealed up and ready to go?"

"All green, chief. Just waiting on you."

"Good. Let's cycle the lock, and get ready to roll out the red carpet."

With that, they entered the airlock and proceeded to stand around doing nothing while the chamber depressurized. It took even longer than usual, and the wait was excruciating while her imagination ran away with her,

inventing all kinds of alien menaces lurking on the other side of the door. She just wanted to get it over with.

Then Sal started to have second thoughts. She turned to Kazuo and asked, "If this goes wrong, you have any idea how to fight in one of these?"

She could see Kazuo's face clearly in the multicolored glow of his heads up display, and he had an evil smile from ear to ear. He punched his left palm with his right fist, producing a heavy thud, and said, "The old fashioned way, Sal. Honestly, I've been waiting for a chance to bust skulls since the first time I climbed into one."

"Great," she said, and she wasn't sure if she was being sarcastic or not. Then the outer door opened and they marched into the light of day.

The launch facility was a hundred meters from the southern airlock, and amounted to little more than an east-west airstrip and a gantry with a decaying multi-stage rocket. There were a few steel cargo containers piled up to one side, but there was little else of interest. The facility was all but abandoned.

Sal and Kazuo stopped at the edge of the pad, the rest of the team flanking on either side, and they waited. For what, none of them knew, but they hoped for the best. They didn't have to wait long.

"Heads up, welcome wagon. Subject inbound from the West."

Sal scanned the skies and caught sight of a star plummeting out of the western sky. She keyed into a phantom keyboard, and the MASPEC's display enhanced the image. "Confirmed, base. We have visual contact."

The bright spot of light became an oblong vessel, and it came down at an astonishing speed only to suddenly halt over the pad, just as the mothership had done in space. Then, as it hung there in mid-air, it came about and gently lowered itself to the tarmac.

The greenish vehicle looked like nothing Sal had ever seen before, and if she hadn't just watched it land, she wouldn't even have guessed it was a ship. It was sixty meters from one end to the other, and only marginally aerodynamic, shaped something like the head of a squid. The segmented surface was covered with overlapping scales in some places, while other parts were smooth as pearl, and it stood on five insectoid feet. Mist rose from its every crevice and cavity.

"I can tell you right now Blade didn't build that. What on Earth is it?" Kazuo asked. The phrase wasn't common among long-time colonists.

Sal had no idea. “If I had to guess, I’d say it’s probably never been on Earth at all,” she said.

“And I’d believe you.”

She waved her people forward with a dreamy gesture and they marched on toward the strange ship, rifles at the ready. They moved slowly, apprehensively, at any moment expecting some savage race of aliens to explode from within and eat their faces. Much to their surprise, the attack never came.

When they were about six meters from the ship, a rounded structure on the side melted away like a hot tar bubble popped in slow motion. Sharp light came from inside, and when it subsided, Sal could see four people wearing standard white GAF pressure suits. The person at the front of the group gave a friendly wave.

Sal waved back.

The ship produced a ramp, and the four occupants stepped down it, moving with surprising comfort in Mars’ low gravity. Newcomers were always uneasy walking on Mars for at least a few weeks, but these were surefooted. Sal didn’t know what to make of that.

Their leader walked right up to her and looked her suit up and down in amazement. He looked small, but everyone did from inside a MASPEC. He was a black man in his thirties with a strong chin and a good spattering of grey in his hair. An orange device was barely visible through his face mask, attached to the side of his head and similar in style to his ship. It looked like a mechanical spider. The man was smiling.

“That suit is really something,” he said, his warm voice coming in over her crackling headset. “What do you call it?”

Sal blushed. “MASPEC. Mechanically Augmented Support Platform, Environment Controlled. It’s my own design.”

“You’re very talented,” he said. “Techs back home have been trying to build powered suits for ages, but they never got this far. Never anything this elegant. They killed plenty of test pilots in the process, too.”

“I know. I was planning to patent the design once I got all the bugs worked out, but... well, I guess that’s not going to happen now.” She pointed to him and furrowed her brow. “You’re Marcus Donovan, aren’t you?”

“As I live and breathe,” he said. “Now, if you’ll pardon me, I’ve been waiting all my life to say this. I come in peace, Martian. Take me to your

leader.”

One of his men buckled over in laughter, while the other two shook their heads. Right then and there, Sal realized she was in for a strange day, and she’d need to find that aspirin soon.

Chapter 23:

Becoming Caesar

When Marcus Donovan was a child, he spent countless nights staring through his uncle's rusty old telescope at the tiny reddish speck that was Mars, all the while imagining a fantastic world over-run with jungles and weird, ancient ruins. It was a world of adventure and unending surprises where dozens of savage species warred for supremacy. Somehow, despite Mars' best efforts to the contrary, the fantasy never completely left him.

As he grew older, he collected images from all the unmanned probes which had been sent to scout the red planet. The old guard of space exploration—venerable names such as NASA, Roskosmos, JAXA and ISRO—had produced thousands of images from orbit and later from the ground. They uniformly described a desolate landscape interrupted only by rocks, but Marcus' dreams plodded on unimpeded.

When he was thirteen, his parents let him stay up late to watch the first Mars landing live on TV. Six years later during his first year at university, he stayed up for two straight days watching the Ares Colony's daring drop from space. He failed two finals because of it. Even then, with the reality revealed on a constant video feed, he continued to believe that Mars was the most interesting place in the universe.

Now he was sitting in a conference room perched on top of the colony's main dome, surrounded on all sides by a three-sixty view of the Martian desert, and he couldn't tear his eyes away. It wasn't how he'd imagined it all those years ago, but he realized he hadn't been fair to Mars. He hadn't accepted her for what she truly was. The stark emptiness held its own alien beauty, whispering a long story of solitude, while hinting at an exciting future yet to come.

Amira Saladin—the woman with the striking eyes who'd met them in her powered suit—was the administrator's daughter and the colony's chief engineer, and Marcus found her just as intriguing as the planet she called home. Considering her age, he'd normally have assumed her rank was the product of nepotism, but he'd seen evidence of her talent first hand. The colony relied on technology more than a decade past its prime, but she kept

it running and upgraded to the latest spec. She could probably build a radio out of two rocks and a seashell if she had to.

Ms. Saladin had given Marcus and his team a quick tour of the facility before bringing them to the meeting room, and when she was finished, he asked her to stay. She looked confused, but with a little coaxing, she obliged.

Then they waited. Marcus would've hated the wait if not for the view.

Faulkland and Juliette were seated to Marcus' left, and Rao to his right, while Ms. Saladin was half-way around the large table. Marcus thought her choice was a safe one, like taking a seat in the back of a class.

"Your father must lead a very busy life," Faulkland said to her after a bit.

Marcus was looking off toward the eastern horizon, trying to find any hint of Olympus Mons in the distance, without luck. "No," he answered for her. "He's the type to make his guests wait. Gives them a chance to reflect on how important he is."

Ms. Saladin didn't respond, but her smirk told him he was close to the mark. "That's alright," Marcus added after a moment. "I'm not sure how many important people we have left. A little reflection couldn't hurt."

Another minute passed in silence, and then the administrator came through the door, flanked by a pair blue-suited advisers. Administrator Saladin was the absolute image of a statesman, dressed in a fine graphite suit with a red-and-white sash across his barrel-chest, decorated with dozens of medals accumulated during his long career. He was a heavy set man, and had no doubt been exceptionally strong and stout even as a youth. The weight had since become ornamental, but he would probably still place well in an arm-wrestling contest.

Everyone stood. Marcus took a long stride forward and shook the administrator's hand. His grip was firm but not crushing, and he had the same penetrating eyes as his daughter.

"Administrator Saladin, it's an honor to finally meet you, sir."

"And you, Doctor Donovan. I've always heard you're a surprising man, but the rumors hardly do you justice."

Marcus smiled through his embarrassment. "I must apologize for our rude approach to your planet. We're still learning, Mister Administrator."

"Think nothing of it, Doctor. But in the future, perhaps a little warning would be in order."

“Absolutely, sir. Warning, and more.”

With a smile, the Administrator motioned toward the table. “Please, have a seat everyone. And perhaps the Doctor will tell us how he came to be in possession of such an astonishing vessel.”

For the next hour, Marcus told them the whole story from beginning to end. How he discovered Zebra-One by accident, and the years of research he conducted in secret, one short glance at a time. The gamble he took in deceiving the Foundation, his team’s arrival and initial exploration of the vessel, and how he came to have an alien interface plugged into his brain.

Then, as if the rest of the story hadn’t been fantastic enough, Marcus told the administrator what he knew of the ship’s origin, of Eireki history and their desperate fight against the Nefrem. He revealed how the human race itself came to be, and when it was all over, he was badly in need of a glass of cold water.

The administrator and his two lieutenants were left in a stunned silence, while his daughter had a look of utter disbelief on her face. It was the look of a little girl who’d just been told that unicorns were not only real, but also the source of hamburger meat.

“This is... it’s quite a lot to take in all at once,” Administrator Saladin finally said in his gruff voice. “And you believe the invaders to be these... Nefrons?”

“Nefrem, sir. And to be honest, neither Legacy nor I know for sure, but until we know one way or another, we should assume so.”

“A very sensible thought. And what of the war you told us to prepare for?” The administrator exhaled sharply, with a hint of a growl, and shook his head. “I understand you have some kind of warship, but that hardly seems enough. Fill in the missing pieces, Doctor.”

“You’re right. It’s not enough, sir. That’s why I’m here.” Marcus recalled the plans he’d sketched out with Legacy, and she echoed them distantly from orbit. He felt her presence there in his head even planet-side, but she was faint, and he felt oddly empty without her.

“Legacy is vastly powerful. We’re only just beginning to understand the extent of her abilities. But I neglected to mention that she also houses a factory equipped with technology which far outstrips our own. The skiff that brought us here is just one example of the fleet already under construction, and it was built in just two weeks, if you can believe it.”

“Impressive. So you’re going to build your own armada?”

“Much more than that, sir. Your colony is little more than a frontier town right now, and our first step should be to transform it into a fortress. A safe haven for humanity. With your permission, we’ll establish a second factory here and a handful of mining facilities. With our enhanced manufacturing, your habitat can be improved and expanded, giving your population room to grow. Meanwhile, Legacy will build orbital defenses to prevent the kind of attack that devastated Earth.”

“And then?”

“Then we build a proper fleet and liberate our people, sir.”

The administrator had never stopped shaking his head. This was going to be a tough sell. “I have seven thousand men, women and children living on this planet. These people are colonists, Doctor Donovan. Not soldiers. Tell me, what kind of liberation force could that amount to?”

“I’ll be the first to admit we’re facing an uphill battle, sir, but we must fight. It isn’t just the planet we’re talking about. Our analysis of the Copernicus Transmission indicates a sizable number of survivors. Perhaps as many as two billion.”

“Two billion?” the administrator said, and he mulled over the decimal places.

“It’s not easy to condemn two billion people to death, is it?”

“It’s never easy to condemn anyone to death, but difficult choices must be made sometimes.”

“I’m sorry, but if we can help them... if there’s even a chance, then it’s our duty to try. Ask your people, Mr. Saladin. Let them decide for themselves.”

Marcus knew that he was pushing too hard, but every minute wasted amounted to more deaths that could have been prevented. They needed to get to work, the sooner the better.

The administrator had his hands on the table with his fingers laced together, and he was staring at them while he chewed on his thoughts. “It’s true. Something must be done, and if I extend your request to my people, you would have many volunteers. They’re a courageous and selfless lot. However, I’ll not give them the option until I’m convinced this is more than a suicide mission. The invaders destroyed our civilization in the blink of an eye, Doctor. What could a few thousand colonists do in the face of such overwhelming power?”

“Simply put, sir, the situation has changed. The invaders caught us with our pants down. They appeared without warning, scrambled communications before anyone could get the word out, and slaughtered billions who never saw it coming. This time, we’ll have surprise and superior technology on our side.”

The administrator still wasn’t convinced. Marcus went on. “As long as Copernicus is operational, we’ll have an abundance of intel about enemy troop concentrations and defenses. With a little planning, we can launch surgical strikes that will cripple their infrastructure with minimum risk to our own forces.”

“And what sort of weapons will we use? Eireki weapons?”

Marcus smiled. The administrator was a very shrewd man. “Actually, that’s one of the obstacles still ahead of us. Legacy is... how best to put this... forgetful, and my people, brilliant as they may be, are stargazers and mathematicians. Not weapons designers. We’ll need to develop our own weaponry, and your chief engineer is the key to that.”

“Me?” Amira Saladin asked.

Marcus gave her a reassuring nod. “If you’re willing, Miss Saladin. I’ve seen your work, and I wager a single colonist outfitted with your MASPEC armor would be worth a hundred standard infantry. Just imagine what else you could build with our technology.”

From the look in her eyes, she began to imagine right then and there, and that look alone confirmed Marcus’ suspicions. She was just the kind of person they needed to make this work. The kind of person Legacy needed.

“How long would you need to make your plan a reality, Doctor Donovan?”

“One year. An Earth year, that is.”

The Administrator closed his eyes for a second and pursed his lips. When he opened them again, he spoke. “Against my better judgment, you may have your year, Doctor.” They shook hands across the table. “But I’ll be keeping watch on your progress. I reserve the right to pull my people out should you fail to meet my expectations.”

“Understood, sir. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

One year. It was longer than Marcus could stand, and less than they needed by half, but it would have to do.

Chapter 24:

Remedial

The midsummer sun was brutal. Jack Hernandez lay on his stomach, looking down the sights of a matte-black assault rifle while sweat ran off him in rivulets. He was wet from head to toe, the sweat making his weapon slippery as a fish. Fifty meters beyond the tip of his barrel sat a target in the shape of a man. A man who was mocking him. He might have imagined that last part.

Everybody else had qualified on their first day at the range, including Leonid Nikitin who hit every target with ease. He claimed he could blind a suicidal king at three hundred meters, and it was probably true. Shooting was second nature to that man, but Jack wasn't so lucky. He was now on his third straight day of shooting, and the brass had assigned him a personal tutor as a last resort.

"Go ahead and take your time," his little brother Charlie said. "There's no rush today. Line it up so the post is right in the middle of the notch, then put it on your target."

Jack thought it was lined up, but he wasn't sure. After all, he'd thought it was lined up every other time he pulled the trigger, but that blasted target was still in one piece.

"Is it lined up, Jack?"

"I think so."

"I need you to know it is, bro."

"Fine. It's lined up."

Charlie sat down in the dirt next to him. "Relax. I know you're frustrated, but I'm trying to help. Just put the post on the target, alright?"

"Okay," Jack said. He shifted the rifle left and right, watching the space on either side of the post shrink, then he centered it again. The top of it was level with the top of the notch, and it was sitting dead in the middle of his target. "It's lined up."

"It helps to focus on the post, so the target is blurry behind it. Got it?"

"Done."

"Now take three slow breaths. At the end of your third exhale, go ahead and squeeze the trigger."

Jack filled his lungs and let the air slowly escape, then again, and one more time. At the bottom of the last exhalation, he pulled the trigger and the weapon barked. The butt-stock bit into his shoulder.

Charlie raised a pair of binoculars to his face and sighed.

"I didn't hit it, did I?"

"Nope," Charlie said. "Tell me what you did wrong."

"I don't fucking know, Charlie. I did everything you said. Maybe the sights are off."

Charlie shook his head. "Weapon was adjusted before it left the armory, and I test fired it myself. It's fine. Now tell me what you did wrong."

"Why don't you tell me," Jack growled through gritted teeth.

"Alright. Two things. First, you closed your eyes right before you fired. Don't do that. You can't hit what you can't see. Second, you pulled the trigger. I told you to squeeze it."

"And what's the difference?"

Charlie chuckled, and Jack didn't know what was so damned funny. "When you're dancing with a pretty girl and you've got her hand, you pull her to you. Once you've got her close, you give her a squeeze."

Jack closed his eyes for a second and Jess was there at the end of his arm. She was laughing and smiling, and he pulled her to him, but before she was in his arms, he opened his eyes and was back in eastern Israel under the hot summer sun.

Charlie dropped down on his belly next to him and put his arms out like he was holding a rifle of his own. With his right hand, he extended his index finger and curled it several times. "You're pulling the trigger, and it yanks the weapon around and blows your aim all to hell. Don't pull it." Then he opened his hand up and tightened the whole thing, like he was testing fruit. "Squeeze it. Gently. Now try it again."

Jack resealed the rifle against his shoulder and lined up the sights. He took three easy breaths and at the bottom of the last one, he squeezed the trigger. The weapon barked, and the butt-stock again bit into his shoulder.

Charlie was watching the target this time, and he said, "Better. Not perfect, but you're getting there."

"I hit it?"

"Real close, bro."

"Damn."

Charlie rolled onto his back and locked his hands behind his head. "Tell me about your weapon."

Jack licked the sweat off his upper lip, and his mouth was filled with salt. "It's an AN-23. Russian designed, gas-operated, rotating bolt, 5.45 millimeter assault rifle. Fire modes include semi-automatic, fully automatic, and two-round burst. The burst mode utilizes a... uhhh, blowback shifted pulse technology, ejecting both rounds before the recoil kicks in, and allowing you to hit the same spot twice with a single trigger pull. Or trigger squeeze."

"Okay," Charlie said. "You read the manual. But tell me about *your* weapon."

"What?"

"Tell me how it feels. How it smells. How it looks."

"It's a damn gun, Charlie. It's an automatic death machine. What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to tell me about this specific gun, not how you feel about guns in general. What was the first thing they taught you when you were issued your weapon?"

"They showed us how to take it apart, clean it, and put it back together."

"And why do you think that was?"

"So we know how to maintain them in the field?"

"That's part of it, Jack. But they also wanted you to start forming a relationship with it. Start caring about it."

"That's ridiculous."

"No, it's not. You have to depend on it. Not like you depend on a friend, either. You have to trust it to do its job the way you trust your hand or your knee. It has to be part of you. But you won't let that happen. You're too busy hating it, and you can't expect something you hate to save your life. Doesn't work like that, Jack."

Jack grunted and wiped the sweat from his forehead. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out why he was a deluge while Charlie was dry as a bone. That fact was really starting to piss him off.

"Let me tell you something," Charlie said. "It's not the weapon that kills people. The weapon is just an extension of someone's will. It's a tool, no more good or evil than a shovel or a pen. Go right ahead and hate people who do evil things. They've earned it. But you have to learn to accept that weapon in your hands or you'll never learn to use it."

“Fine,” Jack said. “Are you done preaching yet, Reverend?”

“Just about. Do me a favor and take a good look at your rifle, and really get to know it. I know you’ve seen a lot of people killed by guns, but you have to let those ghosts go. Let them rest for a little while, and actually look at the tool right there in front of you.”

Jack cleared his head and did as he was told. He shook the rifle softly in his hands, and it was silent as a cloud. There was nothing moving or out of place. There was nothing to spare. He felt the roughened texture under his fingers which, contrary to his earlier thought, wasn’t slippery at all. Not even soaked with sweat. He moved his head a little closer, took a whiff and picked up scents of raw metal, hot oil and the acrid tang of spent guncotton.

“It’s three or four kilos. Center of gravity’s around the base of the barrel, and the plastic parts feel gritty, like the tape we used to put on our skateboards when we were kids. It smells... well, it smells like a freshly fired gun.”

“That’s good. Now line up your shot and fire.”

Jack put the post on the center of his target and gently squeezed the trigger. In response, the weapon barked and there was a fast, nearly invisible flash at the tip of the barrel. It bucked into his shoulder but he was ready for it. Fifty yards away, a puff of smoke was wafting up from the center of the target. He tried not to let Charlie see him smile.

“Real good, Jack. Now do it again.”

And he continued to fire throughout the rest of the day.

Chapter 25:

Womb

“Come back to Legacy with us,” Donovan had said, as casually as he might ask someone back to his quarters for dinner. The oddity of it struck Sal like a mallet. She’d resigned herself to Mars, and space travel belonged to her adolescence. It was all in the past.

Launches on Mars were still dangerous and unpredictable business, events that all the children rushed to watch on the southern observation deck, with their mouths agape and eyes full of wonder. The tone in Donovan’s voice said that those days were over. The world had changed overnight, and space travel was about to become as dangerous and rare as a trip to the bathroom.

He hardly needed to ask, of course. What choice did she have? It was so obvious that she was finished packing before she realized she’d decided to go.

When Kazuo found out that Sal was going, he invited himself along for the ride. She wasn’t sure if he felt left out, protective, or some combination of the two, but Donovan’s precise reply was, “The more the merrier.”

They suited up before nightfall and marched out to the skiff while the sun was setting behind the burnt horizon. When they reached the vessel, its circular portal opened and the ramp lowered lowered for them. She couldn’t put her finger on what it was, but the ship seemed eager to meet them, and pleased once they were aboard.

The world had become a strange place, and was getting stranger by the minute.

Sal and Kazuo immediately started searching for seats to strap themselves into. Meanwhile, with a wave of Donovan’s hand, flat metallic panels around the ship became transparent and revealed the darkening Martian landscape shrinking into the distance. The ship was already up and away.

Sal felt a soft jostle but nothing else. “We’re not actually flying, are we?”

“Like hell we’re not,” Donovan said.

Dr. Rao, who struck her as nervous, chimed in. “The ship uses artificial gravity to counteract inertia. You can hardly feel anything at all.”

“Amazing,” she said. “Is it using artificial gravity for propulsion too?”

“Oh no. It takes a rather extravagant amount of energy to project external gravity wells. Only larger ships like Legacy can afford such systems. We’re still not completely sure what the skiff uses for propulsion, but I have theories.”

“Rao always has a theory about something. You’ll get used to it,” Faulkland said gruffly.

“But how can you not know?” Sal asked. “You built this thing in two weeks and you don’t even know what drives it. How is that possible?”

Donovan answered this time. “The short answer is that we didn’t build it. Legacy did, and I use the word ‘built’ loosely. She grew the skiff the way we grow hair or fingernails. It and the tugs, which you’ll see shortly, should be considered components of the mothership. They’re not sentient like she is, and they’d hardly function without her.”

Sentient ships and machines that were grown rather than built. Sal decided she would need some time to wrap her head around those ideas. The world was changing maybe just a little too fast.

It was around then Kazuo tapped her shoulder and pointed into the distance. Sal was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she missed the shift from dusty sky to star filled space, and they were already rapidly approaching a massive green object in the distance. Like the skiff, it was far more organic than technological, but hinted at both in its own ways. It had two conjoined hulls, like some sort of space catamaran, and Sal very quickly put together that this thing was her planet killer. It was Donovan’s warship.

The skiff came around Legacy, and Sal stared in awe at the vast ship glimmering in the light of the sun. As exotic as it was, there were still structures that reminded her of ships on Earth. She made out what appeared to be a bridge tower atop the larger hull, and the whole surface bristled with articulated towers that she figured were weapons, sensors or both.

The skiff came to Legacy’s bow, and Sal got a good look at the front of the two hulls. They were similar in shape, but obviously different in function. The main hull gaped open, with the shadows of some dark machinery lurking within, while the smaller hull’s mouth was covered in a complex pattern of overlapping panels which converged at the center. It had

to be a hatch of some kind. Her suspicions were confirmed as the very center of it slid open just wide enough for the skiff to come inside.

Once through the opening, they were in a different world altogether. The cavity was filled with blue-green light, revealing structures all along the interior surface. The walls near the mouth were covered in a tangle of thick tubes, and behind them lay an uncountable legion of octagonal pads, all facing in toward the center of the chamber. They were all identical in every detail but size, each holding its own set of adjustable clamps, hoses and cables. Long, rectangular buildings split the pads into groups, and were themselves covered in small terraces and balconies.

Other structures jutted out from the walls on thin stalks, like a forest of cradle-topped trees. These grew progressively larger toward the aft, with the largest dwarfing even the vessel that carried Ares Colony to Mars.

“What is this place?” she asked.

“This is the secondary hull,” Donovan said. “It’s broken into separate compartments, each with its own purpose and unique equipment. This one would normally house and launch completed craft. It’s a hangar.”

“Man oh man,” Kazuo said. “Factory, carrier, battleship. Is there anything your ship doesn’t do?”

Faulkland said, “Only one thing so far... land.”

“Actually, there’s plenty she doesn’t do,” Donovan corrected after a moment. “She can’t construct capital ships like herself, nor can she fabricate hollow-drives... her energy source. That’s going to be a serious problem soon enough. She has some trouble with internal repairs, and she’s absolutely rubbish at math. Can you believe that? Still baffles me. I mean, she can count quickly, but that’s about the end of it. Anything more complicated than that, she either does by intuition, or labels it ‘Eireki-stuff’ and leaves it for us.”

Sal didn’t quite follow. “What do you mean by intuition?”

Donovan took a moment to think. “Let’s say I throw you a ball and you catch it. Did you numerically calculate a parabolic arc, or did you just feel where it was going?”

Sal nodded. “Understood.”

“She can operate well enough doing a lot of things that way. She can figure out intercept vectors and orbits without a problem. Unfortunately, there’s a whole host of other systems we can’t use until we figure out the maths behind them.”

Sal noticed that the skiff had passed the landing pads and was continuing toward the other end of the chamber where another hatch waited. “We’re not going to land?”

“Not yet,” Donovan said. “She’s giving you a tour.”

This hatch also opened as the skiff approached, but all the way this time, opening like a flower to the morning sun. The many thousands of panels folded, each into the next, and Sal was hypnotized by all the machinery working perfectly in concert on such a large scale.

“This chamber...” Donovan began to say.

“Is a shipyard,” Sal finished his sentence. They had a distinctly alien flavor, but the bright orange docking rings were enough like wet docks in Earth orbit. She looked on excitedly and recognized the joints that would allow them to shrink or expand to accommodate ships of different shapes and sizes. Sal could puzzle out the uses of most of their tools, even with them lying dormant.

A few were busy, constructing machines whose purposes she couldn’t guess at. The manipulator arms ducked and dodged around their queries at an incredible pace, occasionally stopping to weld a seam and produce a shower of golden sparks.

Sal looked deep into the distance, and there were rings as far as the eye could see. “There are enough facilities here to work on hundreds... maybe thousands of ships simultaneously,” she said.

Donovan nodded. “Once production ramps up, yes, but we don’t have the resources to put it all to use just yet. We will soon, though.”

The skiff drifted along, and Sal watched every set of docking rings pass. Each manipulator arm she looked at extended and resealed itself, like saluting a passing officer. They wanted her to know they were fully functional and ready to go.

“You said the ship reads minds?”

“Give or take,” Donovan said. “Let’s just say that Legacy is very sensitive to certain kinds of thoughts, and leave it at that.”

The skiff approached the end of the shipyard, and this time, there was a single mid-sized hatch surrounded by thousands of smaller replicas. “Those lead to the actual heart of the manufacturing complex, where components are gestated before being brought here for assembly. Past that is resource digestion. We can take a look at both if you like.”

“Digestion?”

Donovan nodded. "The tugs have their own ports in back where they deposit raw materials, which are then broken down for use in manufacturing. I make it sound technical, but it's... not pretty."

"Say no more."

The inside of the skiff was quiet, as if everyone was waiting for someone else to speak. After far too long, Donovan smiled at Sal and asked, "So what do you say?"

"To what?" she asked.

He had a confused look on his face, as if the answer were as plain as day. "You'll have to excuse me," he said, "I have a bit of trouble with what has and hasn't been said sometimes." He gave the interface on the side of his head a quick tap.

Sal had a sense she was being seduced, but into what she wasn't entirely sure. As far as she knew, she'd been brought aboard to take a look around and help them design weapons. Or something.

"This facility has astronomical potential, but in order for that potential to be fulfilled, it needs someone to run it. It needs an inventive mind to give it purpose and direction."

The answer dawned on her, and her eyes went wide with surprise.

"I'd like you to run the factory," Donovan said. "It would more or less be yours."

"This is too much," Sal said, and she started to wave her hands in front of her. "I'm just a wrench jockey. I fix things that are broken, Doctor Donovan. I don't run factories."

"I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but I know you're much more than that. Your work is inspired, and you know it, too."

The woman physician, Doctor St. Martin, waved Donovan off. "Christ, you haven't a subtle bone in your body, Marc. You're putting too much pressure on her."

St. Martin had a warm smile and sharp, inquisitive eyes. Sal suspected this woman was their voice of reason, and the voice of reason went on, "Why don't we put the skiff down and find some dinner? We can give Ms. Saladin a proper tour, and maybe show her some of the ongoing projects tomorrow. Does that sound alright?"

Sal thought about it for a moment. "Everything's so damn weird, I'm not sure what's alright anymore. But I guess that'll do."

With that, the skiff headed back toward the launch bay, and no one spoke of Donovan's offer for the rest of the night.

Chapter 26:

The Weight

Marcus Donovan was floating in the middle of his quarters. The walls were in crystal mode, as he'd taken to calling it, revealing the stars all around and the rust colored planet below. This was how he spent his down time; it was the closest he could get to the pure freedom experienced while reliving Legacy's memory, back when she first plugged the interface into his head. He ached for that feeling, and the ache filled his thoughts and dreams. He just didn't know how to make his longing a reality.

While rooting around inside her mind, he often tripped other memories, but they were only faded images and dim sensations in comparison. They weren't the rich, sensory complete experience he had that first time. He literally lost himself and became her, and it was the single most transformative moment of his life.

Now, she resided permanently at one edge of his consciousness, a friend and confidante, but whole, separate and complete. There was no commingling, no question where one ended and the other began.

Sometimes, Legacy wondered why Marcus was so eager to be rid of himself. She thought Eireki were the most beautiful things in all of creation, and the desire to escape that existence totally baffled her.

Truth was that being out among the stars was all Marcus had ever wanted, though, and he just couldn't ever explain it quite right. When it came right down to it, he wanted to be a ship. He consoled himself with the fact that for one titanic battle, he'd lived his dream. It was more than most people could say.

It still wasn't enough.

He watched the stars and identified constellations for a while, until Legacy told him Amira Saladin was awake and inside the factory. The fact that Amira had trouble sleeping wasn't surprising. Most people had some difficulty their first night aboard, thanks to the heartbeat rhythm audible throughout the ship.

"She's in the factory? That's a good sign," he said out loud. "She'll come around. I promise."

Legacy told him again how excited she was by Amira's presence. The woman had a vibrant imagination, and saw possibilities wherever she looked. Her thoughts were different somehow, radiant like a bright light amid darkness. She was more like the Eireki of old, and Legacy found that especially invigorating.

She told Marcus to go give Amira a nudge in the right direction.

"You're not going to shut up about this, are you?"

The whole of Legacy's being communicated the word "No."

"Fine," he said, "but let me talk to her alone. Really alone. No eavesdropping."

The ship reluctantly agreed.

Marcus floated back down to the floor, threw on a shirt and some loose pants, and headed out the door. At the end of the corridor was a landing pad and transit tube, which carried him several kilometers to the factory where Amira Saladin was silently looking over the machinery. She had the look of someone thinking heavy thoughts.

She was leaning against a railing that overlooked an assembly line. The manipulator arms and their panoply of tools were at rest, just waiting for a job to occupy them.

Marcus walked across the empty floor and took a spot next to her. She didn't react to his presence at all, but couldn't have missed him. She would talk to him when she was ready, he assumed.

And after an eternity, she did. "The future never quite works out how you expect, does it?"

"Not as far as I've seen. Life would be pretty dull if it did."

"Maybe. It'd be nice for a change, though. I mean, when I was a kid, before my family came to Mars, I never ever would've guessed I'd become an engineer."

"You had something else in mind?"

She laughed. "Yeah. Artist, all the way. I can't remember a time when I didn't have paint on my hands. And my clothes. And my face. My mother still has all the goofy little pictures I made."

"So what happened?"

"Mars happened. For my parents, it was a once in a lifetime opportunity. The kind of offer they couldn't refuse, and me... Well, I came along. That's the only choice a teenager has."

“There are only a couple constants in the universe, and one of them is that being a teen sucks. So, I take it there’s no market for art on Mars?”

“I dunno. Thing’s change, so maybe. Probably stupid landscapes. There wasn’t back then, though. Art’s a luxury, and when we first made planetfall, life was hard. A lot harder than anyone expected. We all worked our fingers to the bone in the early days, adults and kids alike.”

“And that’s how the painter became a wrench jockey.”

“More or less. I had small hands, and I could reach where other people couldn’t. I hated it. I hated it so bad that whenever I fixed something, I made sure it stayed fixed so I wouldn’t have to fix it again.”

They both laughed for a while. When the silence returned, she spoke again. “How about you, Doctor Marcus Donovan? What did you want to be?”

“Me? I just wanted to be on Mars.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Completely serious. There wasn’t anything I wanted more. Rocketing through space, traipsing around alien worlds and meeting little green men. That was the dream, and Mars my first target. It was the only planet close enough to be realistic. The only one with the possibility of becoming more than a stupid kid’s fantasy.”

“If it’s any consolation, you really didn’t miss anything. There was nothing on Mars but rocks and hard work.”

“I know. I’d still have given my eye-teeth just to hold one of those rocks, though. I had to make due with a crappy telescope, and by God, I kept my face glued to it from sunset to sunrise, just dreaming about all the places I’d go if I got my chance. If you look close, I’ve still got a dent on my cheek from the eye-piece.”

She looked at his face and started to giggle. “Oh God, I thought you were just saying that.”

“I cheated,” he said. “Neglected to mention the part where my brother smacked the back of my head so hard that I needed ten stitches. What are brothers for, right?”

“That’s terrible.”

“Nah. It gave me character. That’s what mom said, at least.”

Sal smiled, but it faded quickly. “So, you always knew you were going to outer space?” She sounded wistful.

“S’pose so. I went to university on a scholarship, got my degree in astronomy, and then it was straight into the Foundation. I got so wrapped up in the work that I kinda forgot about aliens and weird worlds, and just stared out into the unknown, hoping to discover some strange phenomenon to slap my name onto.”

“Until you saw an alien ship.”

“That was... clearly a turning point for me. I bet I wasn’t the first to see her. It just took someone half-crazy to recognize what she was.”

“Is that when you became Mr. Fix-It?”

“Yep. Doctor Donovan, patch kit and space gypsy. Most despised man in the Foundation, I reckon.”

“How do you figure that?”

“Say you’re working on a project, and the suits inform you that Marcus Donovan is being transferred to your station. How would you take it?”

“Like a slap in the face.”

“Right. I got used to steely gazes and professional sabotage after a while. But it didn’t matter because I had my eyes on the prize.”

A look of utter disbelief suddenly overtook her. “Wait a minute, Donovan. You’re full of crap. You’re telling me your life turned out precisely the way you imagined it.”

“Not precisely. Like you said, the future never turns out quite how you expect. In my case, I just got more than I wished for.”

“More of what?”

“Everything. I wanted to see new places and peoples. Instead, I’ve got an alien warship plugged into my skull, and now this war... The Earth’s lying in shambles, Legacy keeps telling me the fate of the galaxy is hanging in the balance, and I’m the only person in a position to do a damn thing about it. Can you imagine that? No one likes having responsibility dropped on their shoulders, and I’ll be frank with you... I’m the worst possible candidate for the job. I’m not a general, or even much of a leader really. I’m just an astronomer who likes to solve problems.”

They were both silent in the wake of that revelation. Marcus hadn’t paid much attention to how he felt about it all. He’d just been along for the ride, doing whatever came naturally, and this was the first time he stopped to think about it. He wasn’t entirely pleased at what he found.

They both looked out over the sleeping factory for a long while, until Marcus finally spoke again. “I know this isn’t the future any of us expected,

Amira, but whether we like it or not, it's the one we were dealt. The fate of our race is hanging in the balance, and we need all the hands we can get. Even the little ones."

She was still quiet. He decided it was time to leave, and let her make the right choice on her own. Before he left, he said one last thing. "We'll all collapse if we don't carry this weight together, and there won't be anyone left to pick us up."

It was true: Marcus Donovan didn't have a subtle bone in his body, but sometimes subtlety wouldn't do.

Chapter 27:

Cellular

With their training complete, the Bravos became a full-fledged combat cell with Jack in command. They kept their ERC jumpsuits, whose colors had faded to dull brown during their long months in the dirt, and they added desert-camo ponchos as further protection against the late summer sun.

Charlie told them their first mission would be a warmup, requiring nothing more than basic competence. These types of missions were assigned to separate the wheat from the chaff. Successful cells moved on to greater challenges, while failures would either be drummed out of the organization, or simply swallowed up by the sands.

Their assignment turned out to be just as simple as Charlie suggested. The Bravos were to head into the Gaza Strip to search for spare fuel cells, and conduct routine reconnaissance along the way. It was known territory with plenty of cover, and screwing it up would require real effort.

The resistance always moved at night. During daylight, alien forces were everywhere, their cuttlefish flitting through the air and long-legged walkers stalking the land. But at night, the alien forces dwindled to scattered foot patrols, and mankind made their moves. The darkness became their last refuge and final domain.

No one knew why the alien activity dropped off after sunset, but there rumors and theories flew around in abundance. Most claimed the alien vehicles were a combination of solar powered and cold blooded. Jack meanwhile found a good chuckle in thinking the invaders were afraid of the dark.

Nikitin had his own theory, based on the pet bird he had as a kid. The bird was a parakeet named Mister Whistles, and whenever the sun was up, Mister Whistles would tweet and twitter non-stop. But if someone so much as dropped a blanket over his cage, he'd go silent as a whisper. Lights out birdy. Nikitin called it the "alien parakeet theory," and Albright was an unexpected supporter, preferring the more sophisticated sounding "diurnal theory."

Whatever the reason, daytime was off-limits. The Bravos trundled out over rocky terrain in a military four-wheeler with Corpsman Andrew Chase

at the wheel, and arrived before sun up. They hid their vehicle beneath a dirt-brown tarp on the outskirts of the farms, in the palm of a rock outcropping shaped like a hand thrusting out of the soil. The aliens weren't known to be curious, but caution was rarely a mistake.

Then the sun came up. The air turned hot and dry, but unlike Al Saif where the ground was a single shade of beige, the land near Gaza was fertile. Bountiful even. There was ample farmland full of fresh but abandoned crops, separated by pockets of damaged-but-standing buildings, while a scorch mark that used to be a city loomed off toward the coast.

The Bravos found one of the sturdier bombed-out and partially fallen buildings, and made camp for the day. Chunks had been taken out of it, but all three levels remained, and it made a good observation post, offering shady hiding spots and a bit of altitude in one crumbling package.

Then the cuttlefish started to pass overhead. The air wasn't filled with them, but they went by often enough to remove any thoughts of stepping outside. There were a few patches of cover out there, but only separated by long stretches of open terrain. Without anti-vehicle weapons, getting caught would equal a swift death. It was simple math.

Jack busied himself studying maps of the area, trying to make some connection between the drawings and the wreckage all around, but he wasn't having much luck. The maps were the old folding paper style, which had hardly been used in more than fifty years. They were relics from a time before global wireless and teraflop pocket computers, and these particular specimens were woefully out of date.

Despite being awkward to fold and more wrong than right, Jack still kind of liked them. There was something tactile that was missing in the digital versions, and since he didn't have anything else to do, trying to understand the maps made for an acceptable pass-time.

The others found ways to occupy themselves as well. Albright inventoried her first aid kit and ammunition, and Nikitin kept watch through the scope of his marksman rifle. Chase was playing some incomprehensible card game with Nick McGrath, who preferred to be called Trash for some reason he wouldn't explain. Rebecca Hartnell and Keith Cozar were staked out downstairs, where they could watch the northern corridor.

Their hideout was silent for hours.

"Hot damn, those things are fast," Nikitin said sometime before noon. "Hey Jack, how fast do you think that's going?"

Jack looked up from his maps and out over the farms. On the horizon, one of the four-legged alien walkers was galloping by like some kind of monstrous Chernobyl gazelle. "I don't know. How long do you reckon the legs are? Twenty meters?"

"Sounds about right."

"Five, maybe six hundred KPH."

Nikitin let out a dry laugh. "I love the pause. Made it sound like you did some serious arithmetic before making a blind guess."

"You know me too well," Jack said, and folded his map.

Chase and Trash snickered over their cards.

Another moment later, four more walkers appeared in the distance. They were enemy vehicles, each carrying foot troops to parts unknown, but Jack couldn't escape the feeling of being out on safari, watching a herd of wild animals cross the plain. There was a lot of traffic, and he wondered if it was always like that.

At 11:42 AM, things started to go wrong.

Cozar came bounding up the stairwell. "Incoming from the North. Walkers. Four or five."

The enemy vehicles had impressive straight line speed, but they were slow and ponderous in close quarters. Compared to the cuttlefish, they were lightly armed and armored, with only a set of anti-infantry guns to keep interlopers out from under them.

The real threat was the two full extermination squads hidden within. A squad typically included four of the rhinos, heavy shock troops with autocannons and mobile artillery, and another five of the jackrabbits armed with long-rifles, who acted as fast scouts and snipers.

"ETA?" Jack asked.

"Three minutes. Maybe less."

Their building was at the northern end of its pocket of ruins, with the rest of the buildings stretching to the South and West. To the East lay fields full of tall crops, beyond those another small group of ruins and then the rock outcropping where their four-wheeler was stashed.

Jack made the only decision he could in the face of overwhelming odds. "Disperse and hide. Stay on the upper floors, keep your damn heads down, and hold your fire unless there's no other choice. The second you pull that trigger, we're all dead. Cozar, get Hartnell and take up position across the street."

“Roger,” Cozar said, and took off back down the stairs.

“Chase, Trash, cross that field and lay low in the next group of buildings, then head to the jeep the first chance you get. If things heat up around here, get the hell out of dodge.” Then they were off and running as well.

“Nik, stay here and keep an eye on those two. If anything gets near ‘em, take it down. The jeep is our top priority. Clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Albright, you’re with me.”

She acknowledged with a duck of her head and shouldered her rifle. The weapon looked to be fully half her size.

Down below, Trash and Chase emerged from the building and then disappeared into the tall rows of green crops. Their heads popped out every couple of steps, but Jack couldn’t have seen them if he weren’t looking for them. Once he was sure those two were safe and on their way, he grabbed a couple empty drink bottles from the floor and tossed them in his pack. Then he waved Albright on and went up the final flight of stairs to the roof.

The air above was clear. No cuttlefish or clouds. Just blue sky and bright sun. The walkers were approaching in the distance, still a few kilometers out, and raising a hell of a dust cloud behind them.

Jack and Albright were four stories up, looking out across a strip of closely packed buildings. The gap between any of them was never more than two meters.

He scanned the other roofs and spotted his target quickly—a building abandoned while under construction—and he took off running. He chose Albright because they’d done some mountain ops together, and of anyone on his team, he knew damn well she could keep up. She was small but fast, and he figured she’d been into gymnastics as a kid. She had that bouncing, energetic quality, and he could easily picture her whipping out a few somersaults and flips.

Jack took a deep breath and he was off and running. His legs pounded across the dusty roof, then he was airborne for one long stride and landed on the next roof. He heard Albright’s boots keep pace behind him.

No time to stop and look. His breathing was falling into rhythm, and with another few strides, he was up in the air and then down again. This roof was lower, and he rolled with the landing, then was back to his feet and on the move.

There was only one to go. With his final leap, Jack sailed through the open air and collided with the wall. In another second, he had his leg up on the ledge, and he clambered over. Albright was only a step behind.

He hit the deck and took a moment to catch his breath. The tiny woman beside him was hardly warmed up, and Jack shook his head. "Doesn't anything wear you out," he asked.

"Only one thing I can think of," she said. "So, what's so great about this place?"

"You'll see," he said. His breath came back under control and he hopped back up to a low crouch, then hurried across the half-completed roof and dropped down into the top floor. He was glad to be back out of direct sunlight. Back under cover.

A quick scan of the room revealed two things: enough unused ducting and lumber to hide in, and a pile of painting supplies in the corner. The supplies were what he was after. He'd seen the scaffolding outside when they first arrived, and it came to mind the moment he heard they had company. "Bingo."

He sat down with his back against the wall, where he could keep an eye on the window, then brought the drink bottles back out of his pack. He lined them up, three in total, grabbed a can of paint thinner from the pile and filled them one by one.

Albright caught on. She drew her survival knife and started tearing strips from a canvas sheet, then handed them to Jack, who balled them up and jammed them in the tops of the bottles. The Molotov cocktail was a weapon as old as the hills, and he'd seen first hand the kind of damage they could do to people. With any luck, the exterminators were just as susceptible.

"You're not planning something stupid, are you hero?"

"Me?" Jack asked. "Hell no. I just want a fallback if things turn from bad to worse."

"Roger that."

She bounced off to scrounge a couple bottles of her own. Meanwhile, Jack peaked through the window, and could just see Hartnell and Cozar rushing through the building across the street with their rifles in hand. Jack grumbled that they needed to get down, and as if by remote control, they did.

An alien walker strutted up to their settlement and stopped at the far end of the street, beside the building where Jack's team had been just moments before. In the distance, he could see other walkers had broken formation, and were milling around the other pockets of buildings.

The nearby walker bent its long legs and lowered its small body to the ground, which then split open down the middle like a pea-pod and released its contents. Jack counted eight rhinos and ten jackrabbits flooding into the street, just as he expected. The creatures split up once on the ground. That was out of the ordinary, according to briefings. The exterminators always worked in packs.

The empty walker lifted back up to its normal height and began to pace the perimeter of the neighborhood. Albright returned around that time, hunched over an armload of various glass bottles. "What's going on out there?" she whispered.

"Not sure. I thought they were after us, but this is way too much for seven sets of boots and a jeep. That doesn't look like a combat formation, either."

"Just a coincidence then?"

"Maybe. Dunno."

"Christ, we have the worst luck."

Each of the exterminators entered a building alone. If they knew about unfriendlies on location, that might work as a search pattern, but it was a reckless one that would rack up unnecessary casualties. Jack had trouble believing they were that careless. Never underestimate the enemy, and all that jazz.

Then he waited. The thump of the rhinos' massive feet echoed through the streets, and the jackrabbits made their strange tittering noises. Jack figured it was some kind of language, but it sounded like random clicks and yelps to him. Maybe there was still a linguist somewhere who could make heads or tails of it.

The exterminators started to return after half an hour. They came with armloads of something Jack couldn't quite make out, and then would head back out to search for more. Their bounty was bright and colorful, whatever it was, and they built a pile where they'd been dropped off. He could only imagine the same was happening all over the Gaza Strip.

He suddenly realized he'd lost track of the walker, and found it again as it passed within feet of his window. Both he and Albright ducked and

silently lipped curses as the alien vehicle filled their view and lumbered casually by. That was the closest look he'd gotten at one of their vehicles, and every feature reinforced the feeling that it was a living, breathing creature of its own. Jack had no idea what to make of that, so he filed the thought away for later.

He considered using the Molotov while the walker was in range, but put the idea out of his head as quickly as it appeared. With the way his luck had been, the walker would shrug off the flames, and then proceed to tear him to pieces with its anti-infantry guns.

He raised his head up for another look around and caught motion from the corner of his eye. It was Cozar standing in the window across the street, waving his arms like a madman. He was trying to get Jack's attention. When Jack signaled back, Cozar pointed down toward the ground floor and mouthed some words. Jack wasn't too great at reading lips, but managed to pick out, "Get down. They're coming."

It clicked. Jack grabbed the back of Albright's poncho, scrambled across the floor and slid into the pile of parts and debris. They found a small hollow and pulled a loose ventilation grate down for cover. It was only a few seconds before they heard footsteps in the stairwell, and then one of the jackrabbits marched into the room.

The little bastard looked left and right carefully as he entered, then hopped and slowly walked across the floor. For a second, he looked like he was about the turn and leave, but then he saw the two rows of Molotovs sitting on the floor.

Jack cursed his stupid rookie mistake. As quietly as he could, he clicked his rifle's fire selector over to fully automatic, and got ready to gun the creature down.

The jackrabbit crouched down and looked at the bottles. He put his ornate long-rifle behind his back where some kind of clamp automatically latched onto it, then he picked up and examined one of the bottles.

Jack had never been one for prayer, so he hoped Albright was gripping her crucifix for both of them.

Then the jackrabbit lifted up his black mask and revealed the all-too-human face beneath. His mouth and nose were small, angular and elegant, in contrast with the huge, expressive eyes that took up half his face. He lifted the bottle to his nose, took a sniff and winced, then put the bottle back down and replaced his mask.

He took one more look around the empty room and left.

“Son of a bitch,” Jack said. He’d been holding his breath the whole time.

Albright said, “I coulda killed him. Knifed him. It would’ve been easy.” The little doctor was always full of surprises.

“And when he didn’t return, we’d have to deal with the rest of the pack.”

“True.”

They waited another ten minutes before climbing back out of their hole, during which time Jack didn’t hear any gunfire, screaming, or any activity what-so-ever. It was a good bet his people were still alive.

The exterminators’ strange hunt went on through the afternoon, and at the end they sorted their findings into stacks. Jack and Albright watched from the safety of their high window the entire time, only occasionally forced to duck as the walker again strolled by.

Then, as dusk approached, the aliens loaded their bounty into the lowered walker, mounted up and left. Two rhinos and a single jackrabbit stayed behind, probably to make space for the cargo and wait for the next ride.

Jack had no intention of staying overnight.

Chapter 28:

Scarification

A couple minutes past sundown on the Gaza Strip, the sky was blue-grey and the last shred of light was in its death-throes when Jack heard the jeep's horn in the distance. There were two quick honks and then silence. A cattle call.

The three exterminators at the far end of the street reacted immediately. The two rhinos made short, deep grunts between each other. The jackrabbit's long pointed ears pricked up, then it pointed one of its long, clawed fingers across the fields to the East.

The exterminators conversed for a few, then turned and headed to investigate, with the jackrabbit bounding out ahead and the rhinos lumbering behind. They disappeared into the distance, and several seconds passed before a rifle shot rang out, followed by a pained and plaintive cry.

Jack and Albright hit street-level and scurried from cover to cover, Cozar and Hartnell meeting them along the way. They moved down one side of the street with their weapons at the ready, and returned to the three story building that'd previously been their camp.

There, they found Nikitin on the top floor with his back against the wall, next to the hole that had been his lookout. "Stay down," he said, "They didn't see me, and I aim to keep it that way. I clipped the little one, but it wasn't a kill."

"How far out?"

"Nearly across the field. They grabbed their wounded and bolted for cover in the buildings."

"Good," Jack said. "If Chase and Trash have a clue between 'em, they'll find somewhere to hide."

"So what's the next move, chief?" Hartnell asked.

Jack looked over the field. The crops were the only cover from one side to the other. They obscured vision, but offered no real protection, especially if the rhinos started shelling with their artillery.

He had no choice, though. He couldn't just leave Chase and Trash to fend for themselves, and they needed that jeep. There were no reinforcements coming, and it was a damn long walk to Al Saif.

“Cozar and Albright with me. Hartnell and Nicotine, spread out and cover us.”

Nikitin opened his scope's lens-cover. “I'm always staying behind.”

“Price of being a good shot,” Jack said with a snicker. “Just think... if you couldn't hit a school bus, you might be squad leader instead of me.”

Nikitin gave him a knowing nod. “Right, right. Get a move on, joker.”

They flew back down the stairs and cut into the field as quickly as they could. It wasn't fast enough, and the worst possible thing happened. They were spotted.

Something thumped hollowly in the distance. The air whistled above and stars raced down from the sky, exploding all around with bright flashes and brittle cracks. “Get down!” Jack yelled. He dove forward on top of his rifle, and listened to the shells hit one after another. One two three. Four five. Six. Two rhinos with three shells a piece. The enemy had to reload.

“Move it!” he called out and climbed back to his feet. “Thirty seconds to the next salvo.” He kept his head down and raced forward, waving the others on with his hand.

Jack couldn't see anything ahead but tall plants, and rushing through the dense crops made it felt like they were moving as fast as motorcycles. His boots crunched in the soil, and the sound of his ragged breathing filled his head. Then the distant artillery thumped again.

Rifles cracked from behind them, cutting the artillery fire short. More stars fell from the sky, but before they landed, Jack and his team were already down on their bellies, ready to wait them out.

The first went off far behind them, but number two was close. Too close. Jack's head rattled, his ears rang, and for just a brief second, he was somewhere else completely.

Silence.

Then he came surging back into the present, like surfacing from a deep-water dive. Someone tugged at the back of his poncho, and he heard Albright's voice barking, “Back on your feet, soldier!”

He cleared his head and climbed up. More artillery fire awaited them and the situation wasn't going to get any better. “Break right!” he called out. “Head for the rocks and find cover.”

“Jack?”

“I'll be right behind.”

More rifle shots sounded, and in response, two streams of bright blue tracers streaked overhead. His support crew had caught the rhinos' attention.

"Flash left, rush right," Jack said to himself as he produced one of the Molotov cocktails. He pulled a weather-proof lighter from his pocket and lit the bottle's wick, then cranked his arm back and chucked it as far as he could. An instant later, the light of a bright fire crackled some thirty meters on.

One stream of enemy fire swept away from his support crew and towards the flame, while Jack ran the other way.

Jack had forgotten how mind-numbing a long run could be. Empty of any thoughts at all, he pounded his feet non-stop straight past the buildings and back to the craggy rock-hand where the jeep was stashed. The sky was finally dark when he got there, and he had to slow down to keep his footing.

After a couple steps, he heard weapon safeties clicking. "Wind," a voice said.

"Stone," he replied. It was a pass phrase, a challenge-response set used to check for friendlies. There were dozens of others.

"Good to see ya, Jack!"

"Hustle up," he said. Now that he had his head on straight, he had a plan. "We don't have much time. Grab some cover in the rocks, and Chase... lean on that horn."

Chase pulled the tarp back over jeep and hit the horn, while the others hid. It was another cattle call, and they didn't have to wait long for the stampede.

The rhinos moved in quickly. They weren't cautious or subtle creatures. They were brute force personified, with as much armor and firepower as a light tank.

They slowed as they came to the rocks, while the insectss on their backs produced glowing stalks to light the way. The behemoths grunted to one another in their weird language, and moved further into Jack's trap. Then the time came.

The two rhinos stepped in front of the jeep and the headlights came on, blinding them. They each raised their thin, central arms to guard their faces from the light, all the while preparing to fire their huge autocannons.

Their opportunity vanished. Trash and Albright opened fire into the rhinos' backs. Bullets tore the insects to pieces, but sparked and ricocheted

off the armor plates beneath.

Cozar lit a Molotov and flung it into the air. It arced down and struck with a crash barely audible above the hail of small arms fire, then exploded in a shower of yellow-orange flames. The monster at the center of the blaze roared in agony.

Jack lit his own Molotov and cranked his arm back, but before he could throw, a high-pitched crack sounded in the distance and the bottle exploded in his hand. Flames engulfed his arm, and he roared in pain. He dove to the ground and tried to smother his arm while another shot rang out.

His right arm sizzled and popped beneath him, and he chewed on his lower lip while fighting the pain. He didn't even feel the heat anymore, just the sheer hurt. All the while, one of the assault rifles continued to rattle off rounds, and the rhino spun to aim at its attacker.

Jack yelled to get down in half-formed barks, but his team knew what they were doing. They were crazy as hell, but they had a plan. The rhino opened fire and angled its autocannon upward, the stream of burning blue rounds biting chunks out of the rock face, while Albright leapt down from her hiding spot and rushed up behind it.

The nimble little woman sprang into the air and latched onto the monster's back. It spun around and futilely reached back to grab her, but she was faster. Her combat knife flashed out and slit its throat, spraying black blood to the earth.

It was over. Jack was in more pain than he could swallow, but he was smiling. He must have looked right loony at that moment, as he grinned and looked at the two dead monsters in the dirt. One was lying on the ground still aflame, and the other lay in a lifeless heap with tiny Lisa Albright triumphant atop it.

They didn't have time to celebrate, though. They needed to get out of town and fast. Jack stumbled back to his feet, slobbering in pain the whole way, and with a breaking voice said, "Chase! Start the engine. We're getting the hell out."

The engine sparked to life and rumbled. Everyone came out of their cover, while Albright cleaned and wrapped Jack's hand and gave him a shot of morphine to take the bite off his excruciating pain. The others removed the rhino's head with a fire-axe, and heaved it into the back of the jeep, beside the creature's similarly liberated autocannon.

When they were all loaded up, Chase pulled out and headed for Nikitin and Hartnell's post. Jack sat in the back, slumped over to the side, and he managed to slip into a nice, deep sleep for the rest of the ride.

Chapter 29:

Snare

The tent's interior was dim in the spare sunshine that managed to seep inside, and Jack was looking down at his gauze-wrapped hand. Six weeks had passed since the fight, and the roasted skin never stopped itching and aching. The burns could have been a lot worse, he admitted, but he was still short a hand. His good hand, even.

He made due. He started carrying a forty-five caliber handgun and learned to shoot left-handed. That hand felt damn near useless and learning to aim reliably was a struggle, but after a bit of practice, it started to come around.

He stretched his burnt fingers then made a fist, and had to grit his teeth against the pain. He had no room to complain, though. It took the surgeons a week to dig all the shrapnel out of Nikitin's side, and he was still in a med-tent somewhere recuperating. With a little luck, he'd be back on the frontlines soon. Rebecca Hartnell didn't fair as well; she got caught in direct fire that night, and one of the rhino's autocannons took a fist-sized chunk out of her shoulder. She survived, but it was a safe bet her left arm would never work quite right again. Despite her best protesting, she was taken off active duty and given a desk job in the armory.

Considering all of that, Jack had made out alright. His hand would never be pretty, but it would work once he got the bandages off. Streaks of scarred skin twisted up from the hand towards his elbow, like permanently etched flames, and they'd serve as a reminder that the situation was never under control, no matter how simple it appeared.

He stepped out of the tent and into the full light of day. The sun hung directly overhead, and a dusty canyon stretched off in two directions beneath him. Their camp was on the Sinai Peninsula, in a known high-traffic area thirty clicks east of where the Suez Canal met the Red Sea. His troops were spread out in three-man groups along the top of the canyon, and his own was the furthest south.

Lisa Albright was a couple meters away with her rifle held across her chest. Stories of her exploits on the Gaza Strip spread quickly after their return, and she'd become a minor celebrity. As far as anyone knew, she was

the only person to kill a rhino in hand-to-hand. Of course, rumors grew and twisted as they spread, and half the resistance now thought she'd faced the beast in single combat and snapped its neck with her bare hands. That was just the way rumors worked, Jack supposed.

She wore a dark red beret that someone gave her, and with her camouflage painted face, she looked less like a physician every day and more like a very tiny commando.

There were stories about Jack, too, but nothing like Albright's tall tales. The brass were talking about his quick thinking and ability to stay cool under pressure, and in an organization starved for leadership, a lot of eyes were on him all of a sudden. His only option was to pick up the ball and run with it.

The resistance had scored a few small victories over the previous weeks, minor annoyances at best, but Jack thought it time to start really pissing the invaders off. He wasn't content to skulk around the night setting booby traps. He wanted to do something bold and noisy. Something the enemy couldn't ignore.

The Bravos, whose ranks had swollen to a few dozen soldiers, hid along the canyon for three days straight. They watched the alien walkers sprint through at two-hundred KPH, and they figured out a rough schedule. Around noon, single walkers tended to come through every forty-two minutes, and there were never any security sweeps or air support. The enemy considered this a safe region.

"Whaddya think, hero? Today the day?" Albright asked.

He nodded. "We'll hit the next one that comes through."

"Good," she said. "I'm tired of this shit hole."

Charlie Hernandez came bounding up the slope a moment later. Most of his black, bug-like armor was hidden under overlapping pieces of ragged cloth, and he looked like some kind of vagrant grasshopper.

The higher-ups wanted someone to observe and report back on the viability of Jack's tactic. Charlie was between posts at the time and quickly volunteered. "The chain is set and ready to go. The forward team's just waiting for a target," he said in his mechanically altered voice.

"What about Trash's group?"

"Locked and loaded."

There was nothing left to do but take cover and wait.

Twenty minutes later, they spotted a dust cloud at the northern end of the canyon. Jack raised his binoculars up, and could see the alien walker galloping in at full speed.

“Here she comes,” he said.

From his vantage point, he could hardly see the forward team’s position five hundred meters on, and he couldn’t see the chain at all. That’s how it was supposed to be.

Then, just as the walker was about to pass the forward team, the thick metal chain snapped taught eight meters above the ground. The walker saw it at the last moment and tried to stop, but it was too late. Its forward legs buckled and snapped, and the vehicle lurched forward, tumbling end over end through the narrow canyon, and then skidded along the rocky soil.

It ground to a halt amid a thick cloud of kicked up dust right under Jack’s position. Trash’s team immediately went into action.

“Fire one!” Trash hollered, and a rocket propelled grenade raced down from out of the rocks with a hiss, followed by a trail of white smoke. The shot struck the back of the walker’s body and exploded in a ball of fire and debris.

“All clear!”

It was time for Jack’s team to move. He, Charlie and Albright rushed down the side of the canyon, interspersing quick hops with controlled slides through the loose soil. By the time they came to the bottom, the smoke had cleared and the walker lay face first in the dirt with its blasted ass in the air, broken and twitching, a massive singed hole where its back-end used to be.

Chase and Trash came down the opposite side, and stopped behind a rock above the walker. They had their rifles trained on the wreckage. “Got yer back, chief!”

Jack team moved. His team clambered up the side of the vehicle and swept their barrels across the opening, ready to take down anything still moving. There was no motion inside the vehicle, only strangely colored blood and carnage. “Sweep through and put a round in every skull. No survivors. Charlie, you documenting this?”

“Recording as we speak,” Charlie said. “We’ll have plenty of footage.”

“Good. Albright, pick out two good specimens of each kind.”

“Roger that,” she said.

The creatures were strapped to the walls with tendril-like harnesses, much like the inside of a leviathan, actually. Jack quickly pushed the

thought out of his head before he had a chance to feel anything approaching sympathy.

The three soldiers moved through row by row, and finished each occupant with a single round to the head. It was mechanical work, and they did it quickly and without passion.

“Jack, take a look at this,” Albright said from the front of the cabin.

He strode over to meet her, and found her standing before a creature they hadn’t seen before. Its flesh was shiny and off-white, like uncooked scallop meat. It was thin and spindly, with no apparent bone structure. It had six arms, a finned tail, and a bulb of a head with thin mouth and a single, off-center blue-green eye.

It sat in some kind of cradle, with its arms hooked into burrows in the walker’s flesh. It was alive, but badly wounded. It mewled in pain and fear.

“Must be the pilot,” Albright said.

Jack nodded. He thought back to the first village back in China, and remembered the floating, six armed creature that directed the operations there. Its shape was right, but all of the details were different. “Sounds about right. I think they wear some kind of armor when they go outside.”

The thing was twitching uncontrollably, and whenever it jerked, the ruined walker quaked. It looked up at Jack with pleading in its giant eye, and it whimpered.

Jack had his forty-five in hand the whole time. He raised the weapon to the creature’s head and pulled the trigger, splashing grey and green on the wall behind. The creature was silent.

“You’re a cold son of a bitch, Jack.”

“You should talk,” he said. “If you can get it out of the cradle, take this one too.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jack heard the rumble of their troop transport outside. The forward team packed up faster than expected. That was good news. They needed to get out before the next walker came.

In silence, Jack and his team carried the alien corpses out, loaded them into the transport, and left for Al Saif. They left the broken walker out in the open, where it would be found a half-hour later. Jack hoped the message was clear.

Chapter 30:

Dissect

Jack wasn't quite thirty and he'd already seen thousands of open wounds. He became numb to the sight of blood and gore, but that hadn't always been the case. No, back when he first joined the Corps, he thought he was a real tough guy, but all the bravado flushed away when he came upon the remains of someone blown apart by a roadside bomb.

The air was thick and smelled like a slaughterhouse, but he didn't immediately put it together. Not until he saw parts he recognized. A hand. A leg sheared off below the knee. Intestines spilling over a curb. Then the floodgates opened and realization rushed into him all at once. The smell was human meat.

Jack ran away and puked his guts out, and was grim and despondent for days afterward. That's when he first met Leonid Nikitin, another young corpsman who already had a year of duty behind him.

Nikitin had enough sense to take Jack out for a beer and listen while the young corpsman came to grips with what he was feeling. He didn't say a word all night, not until Jack was done, and then all he said was, "It's good that you're disgusted, Jackie-boy. You better be, because it's a damn disgusting world out there. That's why we're here, ain't it? Because we're disgusted. Because we care enough to try and make things right. Need another beer?"

That was enough to help Jack pull through. He had a pounding headache the next morning, but when that passed, he was alright. Really alright. He got up, he did his job, and a handful of years later, he became head of his brigade.

That was eight years past, but Jack still thought about it sometimes. As he stepped down into the darkened shelter that had been converted into a ramshackle morgue, the smell brought the memory back again like a freight train. For a moment, Jack thought he was going to lose his lunch, but he metered his breathing and concentrated until the nausea passed.

It took him a little while to adjust to the light. The center of the room was sharply lit by a single overhead lamp, and everything beyond that faded to blackness. Something sat on a raised platform, attended by someone in a

white coat. A moment later, Jack recognized Lisa Albright, who looked temporarily like a doctor again. She was busy dissecting and documenting the aliens, while Charlie stood off to the side, manning a camcorder.

Albright had protested that she wasn't trained for this kind of work, but she was the best they had, and the bodies were already starting to decompose. Without refrigeration, they wouldn't get half-way to the Russian Ark without falling apart.

Jack could make out more detail in the room. The thing on the table was one of the half-tonne rhinos, all of its limbs stretched out and its chest cavity split open. The thick, elephantine skin was pinned to the sides, revealing amorphous discolored organs. Several parts had already been removed and were sitting in shallow metal dishes.

He approached the platform and looked down at the lifeless creature with disdain. "You're having fun, I see. What am I looking at here?"

"I haven't identified everything yet, but most of it's more like us than not. Heart, liver, stomach, lungs." She pointed them out as she went, some still inside the corpse and others arrayed around the table. A la carte. "It's all there in one form or another."

"Learn anything useful?"

"Not yet, but a couple interesting things for sure. For one, they don't wear the armor. It's attached to them. Grows right out of the skin."

"Weird. And the bugs on their backs?"

"Some kind of symbiotic relationship. The rhino has a secondary dorsal breathing tube, like a whale's blowhole, and the insect is attached there. It has a snorkel organ that extends right down into the hole, and branches into the rhino's lungs. If I had to guess, I'd say they have complimentary respiratory chemistries. The armor grew around the insect's hooks, so it's probably been attached for a while."

She walked around the platform and pointed at the creature's crotch. "There's something else. The sex organs are horribly atrophied, probably vestigial. His gonads are about the size of rice grains. I can't imagine it being able to breed at all, which seems to imply some sort of caste system."

"Interesting. Have you dissected the bug yet?"

"Not yet, but I don't expect I'll learn much when I do. You could fill a library with everything I don't know about insect physiology. I've already finished the jackrabbit and the pilot, though."

"And?"

“Weird and weirder. The jackrabbits are all over the place. Their eyes are highly developed, with tapetum lucidum and full nictitating membrane. Their eyes also have multiple lenses, lined up in a series. I think. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“Come again? I don’t speak Latin.”

“Good night vision, can probably see farther than us. Maybe telescopically.”

“Gotcha. Are the rabbits fixed, too?”

“Nope. The specimen we brought back is female, with fully formed ovaries and what appears to be a marsupial pouch.”

Jack chuckled. “Maybe we should start calling ‘em kangaroos, then?”

“Nah. The huge eyes and floppy ears are more iconic.”

“True.”

“As for the pilot... well, there’s just nothing like it on Earth. Or wasn’t, anyway. It’s kind of like someone yanked out some animal’s nervous system and made it its own creature. It’s mostly high density nerve bundles connected to a big fat brain, with a lidless, bioluminescent eye. Judging by the brain to body mass ratio, I wouldn’t want to play chess against him.”

“I hate chess.”

“Me too,” Charlie chimed in.

Albright chewed on her lower lip. “The thing that’s bothering me the most is that none of these things appear to be even remotely related. It’s like us teaming up with pigeons and crabs. I just don’t get it.”

Jack was still staring at the half-dismantled corpse. “I’m all for academic advancement and shit, and I’m sure this is all really interesting, but all I want to know is how to kill them. Tell me you found a weak-spot.”

Albright shook her head. “Sorry, Jack. No silver bullets. They live just like us, though. They eat, they breathe.”

“They bleed,” Charlie added.

“Then we’ll just keep killing ‘em any way we can.”

Chapter 31:

Dreaming in Color

Sal traveled back and forth between Mars and Legacy constantly during the construction of the second factory, and by the time the new complex finally sparked to life, she'd completely moved aboard Legacy. With every trip, she brought more tools, scraps and pieces of junk, until her workshop on the great alien vessel was a perfect recreation of the one she abandoned on the Arcadian Plain. The furniture, lighting and even gravity were all the same. She even rigged up a device to imitate the sound of small stones hitting the colony shielding; the noise had irritated her to tears on Mars, but much to her surprise, its absence bothered her even more.

The difference was that with a single thought, her new workshop's walls could turn clear as glass, revealing the bustling factory beyond. It was hers now, and was churning out equipment at a startling rate. It had become her pride and joy.

The factory certainly wasn't the only source of activity on Legacy. The rest of it was in a constant state of change as the ship and its crew adapted to one another. Legacy grew terminals that mimicked human computers, which went a long way toward improving communications with her new inhabitants. The terminals weren't perfect, and the ship's grasp of language especially could be puzzling, but they were a start.

Engineering posed its own challenges. The original Eireki occupants had been in continual psychic contact with one another, which made their thoughts more orderly and fine tuned. They weren't just people; they were something more, capable of doing complex mathematics and spatial transformations in their collective consciousness. To run the factory, they simply dreamed up new devices to the last exacting detail and the machinery turned the dreams into reality.

Sal was supposedly "more like the Eireki" than the others—whatever that meant—but she just didn't have the mental brawn necessary to drive construction that way. On a few occasions, the machines managed to produce small baubles she pictured in her mind's eye, but she was scribbling on the wall with crayons when they needed the Sistine Chapel.

This left her in a lurch. The factory could dissect and reproduce her machined parts, but couldn't fabricate things like microchips. It could produce a variety of standard Eireki components, but most of it left Sal utterly baffled. She needed to integrate the two somehow, but it just wasn't coming to her.

She briefly considered volunteering for a freaky brain interface like Donovan's, but she couldn't stomach the idea, and it would only go part of the way to solving her problems anyway. While it would aid in back-and-forth communication, it wouldn't make her any smarter. She was plenty sharp with numbers, but was no Eireki savant.

What she needed was a way to plug her workstation into the ship. She'd been using modeling and simulation software for years, and considered the machine her better half, but trying to get it and Legacy to talk was impossible.

At first glance, the problem was similar to designing the MASPEC's interface, but her work there relied on decades of other people's research into biofeedback and human nerve conductivity. The building blocks had all been known quantities; she simply stacked them correctly, with a smidgen of elbow grease and patchwork. Her current problem was a mirror image. She was trying to reverse engineer an alien nervous system, and build a translation layer on top of it. The task was miles outside of her expertise.

She had to find some way to bridge the gap between her digital tech and whatever the heck Legacy used, or construction would be permanently stuck in a rut.

Sal toyed around with a computer aided design program on her workstation. A three dimensional model hovered and spun around in an endless sea of grey. She wasn't working on anything in particular. It was just something to keep her hands busy while her brain assaulted the interface problem.

Then she heard the whoosh of the transit tube, followed by a pair of boots clacking on the floor. She found the prospect of company dreadful, and didn't bother to look up. Hopefully, whoever it was would take a hint.

The person stopped behind her chair. "That design looks interesting. Let me guess... A planetary probe?" It was Marcus Donovan.

"Close. I've been thinking about the people on Earth. They have no idea we're out here. They don't know help is on its way, and I thought maybe we could give them a little hope."

“You’re planning some kind of two way communication, I presume?”

“Depends on if I can figure out Legacy’s comm technology or not. If not, then we can at least send a message in a bottle. Pack in some orbital photos and a note letting them know we’re building a fleet.”

“Maps are good, but leave it at that. I don’t want the enemy to know we’re out here until it’s too late. Until we’re knocking at their door. Your plan is clever, though.”

“Thanks and all,” she said. “But I’m not clever enough to communicate the design to the factory. It’s nothing but wasted pixels.”

“That’s actually why I’m here,” Donovan said. He had that seductive tone in his voice again, like the devil about to offer a deal. “Rao and I discovered something we think might help.”

Discovered something? Sal doubted anything less than a hidden network port would be of much use. She turned and looked at Donovan with skepticism in her eyes. “Well, whaddya got?”

“That’d be telling. Just go to the transit tube, and you’ll see.”

Sal considered not going to spite Donovan and his stage magician theatrics, but if he had an answer, she needed to see it. “Fine,” she said, “lead the way.”

“Ladies first,” he said.

She smiled despite herself. Chivalry was a dying art form, especially on Mars.

She stood and walked to the landing pad. The artificial gravity lifted her into the air sucked her into the tube. She couldn’t escape the feeling Legacy’s transit was a bit like being flushed down an impossibly large toilet, and she didn’t know if that was hilarious or terrifying. Probably a little bit of both.

The tubes passed by in a blur, and then she was lowered down inside a large, dome-shaped white room. There were evenly spaced concentric rings in the floor, each of them a channel full of what appeared to be water, but faintly glowing a rich sea-blue.

Donovan arrived a second later, and strode out across the floor. He beckoned Sal on with a curled finger. “We’ve been trying to figure out the purpose of this room since we arrived. As usual, everyone had a theory, but most resembled Professor Caldwell’s, who was absolutely sure it was some kind of temple. He was really keyed into the perfect circles, and the possibility of a pseudo-Pythagorean geometry cult, or some-such.”

“Doesn’t seem like a bad theory.”

“No, not bad. Except that it was completely wrong.” Donovan waved his hand and the lights dimmed. The man really had a thing for stage theatrics. “Of course, that’s just the way Caldwell is. All symbolism and nothing practical. If he dug up an ancient wrench, he’d spin a theory about it being an abstract lunar sculpture used by moon worshiping priests to summon the seasons.”

“So why’d you bring him along?”

Donovan had a sheepish smile. “Because I’m the kind to dig up a lunar sculpture and assume it’s a wrench.”

“Sensible decision. Alright then, Mr. Smarty Pants, what is this place then?”

“Simple. It’s a projection room.”

There was a slight disturbance in the gravity, a tiny readjustment. Then the fluid in the channels began to rise into the air in streams that dissipated to a thin vapor a half-meter later. “The fluid is doped with micro-organisms that fluoresce when excited.”

Stars and nebulae appeared all around, swirling in the humid air. Donovan floated up from the floor and swam through his new galaxy, and as he pointed to the different stars, each burned more brightly. “Even better, it’s fully interactive.” With those words, a literal handful of stars swarmed above his open palm and circled like fireflies.

“Whoa,” was all she said.

“Precisely what I said when I first saw it. Give it a try.”

Sal closed her eyes and tried to summon absolutely anything to mind, but drew a blank. This new development was just too startling, the possibilities too open. Her heart was racing. Finally, something simple came to her and she imagined it as clearly as she could.

When she opened her eyes, Donovan’s stars were gone, replaced by a reasonable imitation of the table in her workshop. The shape was a little wonky, but it was there.

“Hmmm,” Donovan said. “I expected a little more on your first try. How about your message in a bottle?”

He pushed the holographic table out of the way and it splashed out of existence like waves breaking over rocks. Then he began sketching out her device in the air. As his fingers moved, a glimmering light trailed them and the object quickly took shape.

“Whoa,” she said again.

“Yeah, I said that too.”

“That’s all wrong,” she said after a moment, and floated up into the air. When she reached Donovan, she instinctively started pushing and pulling at the image, and it reacted like clay. Her hands raced around, adding flanges and control surfaces, and soon it closely resembled the model on her computer screen back in the lab.

“So, you see how this might be useful.”

“I’m beginning to.”

“There’s more,” he said. He was deep in thought for a second, and then a perfect replica of one of the tugs appeared in the middle of the room. The small utility ship began to disassemble itself, piece by piece. When the drive section came off, it swelled to several times its original size, became partially transparent, and the major components each turned different colors. “Legacy’s been analyzing her own technology to figure out how it works, and she remembers more from her past everyday. In here, she can show you what she’s learned.”

Sal didn’t waste any time. She flew a couple meters away into still empty air, and started sculpting something in light. She wasn’t sure what it was just yet, but she continued to play with the object until it took shape.

“A car?” Donovan asked.

“I guess,” she said, and added a set of wheels. “Just messing around. Getting a feel for this.”

Donovan had an extremely goofy grin on his face. “And the engineer becomes a painter again. Should I bring your equipment?”

“Not necessary. I’ll get it myself in a bit.”

“As you wish,” he said, and he headed for the transit tube. “If you need anything, just call.”

“I will,” Sal said, but she wouldn’t. She was already on her second object, pulling its edges around like salt-water taffy. For the first time in months, she was having fun. It was effortless and addictive. So much that she wouldn’t leave the room at all for more than a day.

Chapter 32:

Forward

Al Saif was abuzz with activity. Everyone had heard there was “big news”, and rumors ran rampant throughout the base. More information was promised at the general meeting, but in the meantime, imaginations flared up. Each time Jack turned a corner, he found another gaggle of soldiers gossiping about what they’d heard.

Theories were all over the map. He heard one man claiming the invaders had abandoned South America for unknown reasons, and ten minutes later, he heard another excitedly describing a mysterious remnant naval fleet assembled off the coast of Antarctica. Those were just the plausible stories. The implausible ones were even more extravagant, like armies of genetically engineered subterranean supermen rising up in Germany, or captured alien warships in space. He eagerly awaited news of knights in magical armor riding man-eating unicorns.

Evening came, and Jack was in the mess tent, seated across from Leonid Nikitin, who’d just returned to active duty. The human lighthouse viciously attacked pile after pile of food, as if he hadn’t eaten in weeks. He was a bit thinner from bed rest and covered in new scars, but hardly worse for wear. In fact, the jagged scar along his jawline fit him perfectly.

Albright sat quietly next to Jack, sipping from her canteen and otherwise off in her own little world. Even before the invasion, she’d been prone to bouts of deep thought. Jack figured he’d do the same if he knew even a quarter as much as stuff.

“How about this one?” Nikitin said with his mouth jammed full of dry rations. “I heard the aliens started fighting each other, like a civil war or something.”

Jack looked skeptical. “Come on, Nik. You can do better than that.”

“And they’re cannibals?”

“Now you’re getting somewhere.”

“Cannibal zombies.”

“Too far.”

Nikitin laughed hard, and bits of food flew out of his mouth. “Alright, alright. What’ve you got?”

“Ummm... I heard that after years of careful planning, the one thing the aliens didn’t account for was disease, and now they’re dropping like flies.”

“Weak. Do you honestly think no one else has seen War of the Worlds?”

“Wait for it. Sexually transmitted disease.”

“Ha! I can see the headlines now... Alien Armada Defeated by the Clap!”

“Invasion forces penetrated deep, but should’ve used protection,” Jack added with a laugh. He refused to say it, but he was glad as all hell to have Nikitin back. The guy laughed in death’s face as a matter of habit, and his spirit was contagious. He was a walking morale booster, and without him, Jack could get too grim for even his own taste.

“So seriously, what do you think this is all about?”

Jack shook his head. “Not even gonna try guessing, man.” He glanced down at his watch and 7:00pm was fast approaching. “But we’ll find out soon enough.”

They spouted off another half-dozen joke theories while they finished eating, and then all three headed off to the shabby meeting hall where Colonel Galili had spoken that first night.

It was standing room only, and the excitement inside was so thick Jack could cut it with a spoon. As was the stink of sweat. Jack, Nikitin and Albright pushed and jostled their way through the crowd, and stopped only when they couldn’t wade any further in.

“A fire inspector would have a field day in here,” Nikitin said.

Jack laughed. “Good news. I don’t think they’re all dead.”

“Burnt up. Is that ironic?”

“Don’t think so,” Jack said.

“What if they were all attending an international fire inspector conference during the attack, and had exceeded their venue’s maximum occupancy?”

“Maybe. I never got a good grasp on irony.”

The wolfish Colonel Galili stood at his podium. “Settle down. Settle down.”

A hush passed through the crowd, and he began. “Now, I know you’ve all heard a lot of wild theories, and command has decided to take the lid off rather than let these dangerous rumors persist. Let me categorically state that there is no legion of three meter tall super soldiers marching across Eastern Europe... so far as we’re aware.”

A giggle shot through the room.

“Here’s what we know. Six days ago, a strange device of unknown origin crashed near the Russian Ark. At first, they thought it was an unexploded enemy round, until it literally popped open and waved a white flag.”

“Great. Even Bugs Bunny is shelling us now,” Nikitin grumbled.

“When they finally worked up the courage to investigate the capsule, they found surprises inside. There was a binder full of high resolution orbital photos with enemy installations marked, a mini-drive containing the same information, and a handwritten note that said ‘keep hope alive.’”

A low murmur rumbled all around.

“Now, it would appear that we have a guardian angel somewhere up above, but we’re not ready to rule out the possibility of a trap just yet. We are examining the information very closely, and will hopefully come to a decision one way or another very soon.”

While everyone else was whispering to one another, Jack’s hand shot into the air.

“Is that Mr. Hernandez? What is your question?”

The Colonel knew him by name. That was new. “I understand the information hasn’t been confirmed yet, sir, but can you tell us anything at all?”

“The pictures show colonization all along the equator in South America and Africa. The enemy vessels have planted themselves in the jungle, and seem to have transformed into makeshift cities. They have also established numerous observation posts and forts, forming a several hundred kilometer wide defense zone.”

Jack’s hand was in the air again.

“Yes?”

“My team has experience doing search and rescue in the Congo, as well as ops in Uganda and Kenya. I’d like to volunteer to investigate the intelligence, sir.”

Galili stroked his chin for a moment. “Stay and have a word with me, Hernandez. The rest of you are dismissed. We’ll have another announcement when we know more.”

“Ooooooh,” Nikitin said. “Jack’s gotta stay after class.”

“Not the first time,” Jack said.

The crowd filed out, already inventing new rumors to supplant the old ones. Nikitin and Albright opted to wait outside, while Jack went to have a chat with the teacher.

Once the room was empty, Jack approached the Colonel. "What can I do for you, sir?"

Galili was busy digging something out of his pack. He produced a large roll of paper a moment later, unrolled it and laid it out on a large wooden table. "Have a look at this, Mr. Hernandez."

It was a map of Africa with enemy emplacements marked in red. The Sub-Saharan region was dotted with small checks, and four large circles staggered across the Congo, west of Lake Victoria.

"This is the intel, sir?"

"More or less. Tell me... how could I move, let's say, forty troops into theater."

"Alright. We know the Suez is a no-go, and the rest of Egypt is pretty hot from the looks of this. A better bet would be to cross at the Bab-El-Mandeb bridge, and make your entrance through Djibouti."

"You think the bridge still stands?"

"Probably. The aliens struck population centers, but they ignored roadways and bridges. If it's down, you cross by boat. It shouldn't be too hard to find something sea-worthy in the area."

"Interesting. And then?"

"Follow the rift valley all the way to Kenya, then cross Uganda along the southern edge. That seems to be where outposts and patrols are the thinnest." His scarred fingers traced a trail from Djibouti and stopped near Lake Victoria.

"Good. Very good. What would you say, Mr. Hernandez, if I asked you to establish a forward base in Africa?"

"Wait. What?" That caught Jack off guard. He thought he was just giving advice.

"Few of us have experience south of Egypt. We need someone who knows the land. Someone who knows how to survive there. You lead a force along the route you just drew and investigate. If the intel is good, then you establish a base of operations and start hitting the enemy where it hurts."

"I... Can I have a little time to think about this?"

“Take a day if you like, but I already know what your answer will be. You’re the man for the job, and you know it. You were the one who told us to be bold, were you not?”

“I suppose so, sir.”

“And your trip-lines are still racking up enemy casualties. More walkers fall every week. You want to hurt these bastards, and I’d like to help you.”

“A day?”

“One day. Sleep on it.”

Jack wandered back outside, where Nikitin and Albright were waiting for him. “What was that all about, hero?” Albright asked.

“You get chewed out?”

“No. Ummm... The Colonel wants me to establish a base in Africa.”

Albright said, “Wow.”

Nikitin laughed. “Hot damn. You gonna do it?”

“I dunno,” Jack said, “but yeah, I think so.”

“About time,” Nikitin said. “I’m getting sick of this dried up hell hole. Be nice to see some greenery again.”

“Yeah.” Jack was still weighing the decision in his head. “It’s a lot, though. Isn’t it?”

Nikitin laughed. “Maybe. I’m just glad it’s not me.”

“You’re not alone in that,” Albright said.

“Smart mouth you got, little woman.” Nikitin was smiling. “Anyway... I’m gonna go scrounge up another dinner. Anyone care to join me?”

“Nah. I got some thinking to do,” Jack said.

Albright waved. “You’re on your own, pal. That last feeding frenzy of yours turned my stomach.”

“Fine. More for me.” With that, the lighthouse headed off toward the mess.

Jack started walking in no particular direction, and Albright pinned herself to his hip. “So tell me, why wouldn’t you do this?” she asked.

“I dunno,” Jack said. “It doesn’t seem real. I don’t even know how I got this far.”

“That’s easy. As long as I’ve known you, you’ve had a talent for just two things, Jack — surviving, and getting people to follow you.”

“That’s crap. Only reason I ended up in charge of the Bravos was that no one else wanted the job.”

“Bullshit. Two months in the corps, and you were already telling the brigade leader what to do. And he did it. When the position opened up, no one else would touch it because they knew it was yours.”

He laughed. That cut closer to the truth than he was willing to admit.

“Face facts, Jack. If you march into hell, me, Leo and the others will follow you right on in. And you’ll bring us out alive. It’s what you do.”

He heard something in her voice that he hadn’t noticed before, and he turned to look at her. The months of hardship had taken their toll, and she’d become cold and calculating in a way Jack never could have expected. But beneath that, stars were glimmering distantly in her eyes.

The realization didn’t prepare him for what came next. Lisa Albright grabbed Jack’s collar, tugged his face down to hers, and she kissed him.

Her lips were warm and soft and sweet. Her mouth was tender, and for an instant, Jack was lost. For an instant, he was kissing Jess back on a rainy day in San Jose.

He pulled away but stayed close, with his eyes closed and her hot breath breaking on his lip. His own breaths were heavy, and his heart was beating against his chest. “I can’t,” he whispered.

“I know,” she said. One of her hands was on his chest, and he was sure she could feel the thumping beneath. “You’re still mending that broken heart of yours, but someday it’s gonna heal. I’ll be here when it does.”

He was speechless. She knew him a little too well.

Lisa Albright left another gentle kiss on his lips, then turned and walked away. “I’ll see you in the morning, hero.”

Jack vaguely recalled that he had to make some kind of decision, but for the life of him, he couldn’t remember what it was.

Chapter 33:

Tin Can

”...and that was the third time I got crabs. I haven’t returned to Maui since, and now chances for a future visit look bleak, for obvious reasons.”

Nils Jansen took a moment to scratch his thick beard. His razor still worked just fine, but he’d lost the will to shave three months before, around the time he and the other two men aboard Copernicus Observatory were supposed to run out of supplies and starve to death. They didn’t starve, partly because of intelligent rationing, and partly because they ate everything even remotely edible, including their shaving cream. Besides, he thought the shaggy beard was appropriate to the predicament.

He clicked the mouth piece on again. “That blackened mess currently on screen is Korea, as seen at night from a great altitude. Our viewers at home might have noticed it basically looks like a... well, a shapeless blob of land. Most peninsulas in fact look similar from great altitudes at night, and one could easily mistake Korea for Italy, Florida or the Yucatan. This blob is however notable, because... because my software says it’s Korea. Now, I’ve never been there myself, but I hear it’s just peachy. Or was, at some point in the not terribly distant past.”

Marco was on the other side of the command center, bouncing a tennis ball against the window over and over again, and Hopkins had curled up in a corner to read. They’d all lost a lot of weight, but Hopkins still eerily resembled a pilot whale. He looked suspiciously like dinner, actually. Jansen shook that idea out of his head.

“I thought the third time you got crabs was in Maine,” Marco said.

“No. I caught lobster off the coast of Maine. Idiot.”

“Oh. You understand my mistake.”

Jansen took a sip of water out of his bottle. The station’s filtration system was beginning to fail, and the water’s flavor was becoming difficult to ignore. Musky. He chose not to think about what it tasted like.

Marco missed his ball on the rebound, and went chasing after it. “Ever been to Cape Cod, Nils?”

“No, but I’ve had vodka and cranberry juice.”

“I always wanted to go there. Just once,” Marco said. “It was a dream. I figure sailing around New England is like the best thing in the world.”

Jansen watched the darkened Earth beneath them. They’d passed Japan already and were now over the Pacific Ocean. “I’ve done some sailing. It’s not all that.”

“I’m not talking about wind surfing at an island resort with a bunch of drunk hookers. I mean real sailing. On a sloop. Racing in a fancy regatta with the wind in my hair, a white sweater tied around my neck and a glass of red wine in my hand.”

“Wow,” Jansen said. “Just wow. Something really weird musta happened to you as a child.”

“Is it that strange?”

“Uh, yeah.”

Jansen clicked the mouth piece. “And that brings us to tonight’s question... what makes a man dream of sailing the coast of New England? Joining us here in the Radio Free Copernicus studio is closet sailor, Marco Esquivel. Marco, are the rumors true? Do you think about the Massachusetts shore while you masturbate?”

“Screw off, Nils.”

“Riveting show,” Hopkins said.

“How about you, Hop? Any secret fantasies about cutting a jib?”

“Nope. Can’t stand the ocean. I dream about cutting your throat sometimes, though.”

“Zing!”

Right as Jansen started to laugh, there was a strange noise. It was a loud thunk, as if something had collided with the station. It sounded like someone docking.

“What the hell was that?”

“Not sure, but it can’t be good.” Jansen pulled out a metal rod that he’d carefully sharpened to a fine point. He’d planned to kill Hopkins with it when the last of their rations ran out. He was going to slide it between the vertebrae at the base of the whale-man’s neck, killing him instantly. Jansen didn’t like Hopkins much, but he at least owed him a quick death.

He wasn’t surprised to see Marco and Hopkins with shivs of their own.

“Should we take cover,” Hopkins asked in a stage whisper.

“No. Full frontal assault,” Marco said. “You go out ahead, and we’ll be right behind you.”

“It never fucking ends with you two,” Hopkins said, exasperated.

Jansen ducked behind his console. “Don’t talk like that, my cetacean friend. Everything ends. In fact, I bet yer gonna die real soon.”

There were a couple of loud pops, followed by a crackling noise. The acrid stench of ozone filled the air.

“Whatever happens,” Jansen said, “I want you sons of bitches to know I hate you both.”

“Same.”

“Ditto.”

There was a whine of metal shearing, followed by a gong-like-clang and then silence. Hopkins and Marco both found their own hiding spots evenly spaced around the room.

Then they heard the approach. Something moved through the inside of the station, pawing at the guide rails and scraping along the walls. All three men had been aboard Copernicus so long that each noise gave them new information, told them what bulkhead the invaders were passing and how quickly they were progressing.

The monsters split up at the habitation hub, while one headed toward the command center alone. A mistake. The alien bastard was going to be easy prey.

Jansen’s head suddenly filled with twisted fantasies. He imagined killing the invasion party one by one, stalking them like animals in the wild before sinking his shiv deep into their skulls. Then he’d commandeer the enemy ship and return to Earth, where the surviving humans would give him a hero’s welcome. With the captured alien technology, the resistance could craft new weapons and finally turn the tides of war back on their oppressors. Eventually, months or maybe years later, they would drive the enemy from their planet once and for all, and Nils Jansen would be immortalized with a marble statue the size of a skyscraper, which people would revere and worship for all time.

A bright light emerged from the shaft, and Jansen blasted back into the present. The thing’s lamp was so bright that he couldn’t make out the shape of it. How many arms did it have? Did its jaw gape open like a snake’s? Was it covered in breasts?

The creature floated out into the middle of the command center and Jansen’s moment had arrived. He wheeled into position, put his feet against the wall and pushed off, screaming, “Die you alien bastard!”

Shiv in hand, he hurtled through the air, slobbering with fury as he went. The thing's lamp turned toward him and shined him in the eyes, but he would not be deterred. He neared his target and thrust his weapon forward, only to stab at open air.

The creature had evaded his strike like a Spanish matador taunting a bull, but the tactic only stoked Jansen's anger. He twisted around and prepared to launch himself off the next wall, then finally got a good look at the invader.

It was a man in a standard white GAF pressure suit. The light came from his helmet lamp, and he was waving his arms around spastically.

"What in tarnation?" Jansen asked, and briefly wondered what or where 'tarnation' was.

The suited man unlatched his helmet and pulled it off, revealing a wonderfully familiar face.

"Mason?"

Mason Shen had a silly grin, but it quickly faded to a look of total disgust. "Oh man, it stinks in here."

"Mason, is that you? I'm hallucinating. I'm just imagining you, right?"

"Nope. You're not imagining me, but I wish you were. Jesus almighty is it foul."

"Sorry," Marco said, "our subscription to Good Housekeeping ran out a couple weeks ago."

"I don't understand," Jansen said, "how are you here? Did Donovan bring the Shackleton back?"

"The Shackleton? That bucket is long gone, buddy. We're here testing out Faulkland's new ship, Phoenix. Listen, it's a long story, and I'd like to do as little breathing in here as possible. Why don't we get out of this stink pit, hop back in the skiff and get you guys a shave and a shower?"

"That sounds nice," Marco said.

Hopkins was already floating dreamily toward the shaft.

Jansen went back to his console and clicked on the mouth piece one last time. "Due to unexpected developments, it appears that Radio Free Copernicus will be going off the air. I'd just like to take a moment to thank our long time listeners. To all of our supporters out there in radio land, thanks for listening during this long strange journey, and keep on truckin'."

"Are you done?" Mason asked.

"Completely. Let's blow this popsicle stand."

Chapter 34:

Peeping Tom

Jack knew Uganda and Kenya well enough, and he thought he was pretty well acquainted with the Congo rainforest too, but things change. The Earth was now one of those things. The dense jungle had been supplanted by a new environment. A complete alien biosphere. The invaders hadn't just colonized; they were transforming the Earth into a different world altogether.

Near the alien city, green jungle gave way to a strange twisting growth of orange and purple. The branches of alien trees joined together and intertwined in a latticework, making it impossible to gauge where one plant ended and the next began. They formed distinct levels suspended above the ground that Jack and his team traveled across with ease.

The wildlife was overtaken as well. The team saw plenty of native animals on the shores of Lake Edward, including hippos, elephants, crocodiles and even some okapi, but as they ventured deep into the alien world, they found creatures like nothing from Earth. Strange things with tendrils surrounding their mouths and multiple sets of wings flapped erratically overhead, while furry little beasts with arms ending in long hooks and too many eyes swung from branch to branch. The ground below was scavenged by a strange, sedate animal with leathery skin, which crawled around on five human-like arms, and devoured bugs it found with a long snout. It occasionally let out a call that sounded just like a poorly tuned bassoon.

The only natives curious enough to enter the strange world were Jack's team and the occasional band of chimpanzees, both of whom avoided the forest floor and anything not of their world. The passing chimps would sometimes stop to watch Jack and his crew move from cover to cover, before taking off for some other destination.

A few kilometers into the obnoxiously colored forest, they finally found what they were looking for. The forest thinned and came to a halt, giving way to delicately arranged gardens and crop fields of yet more alien plants, and another half-kilometer beyond sat an impossibly large alien fortress in cerulean blue. It stood exactly where the maps had indicated. The great

disc-shaped city was twenty kilometers in diameter, and sat above the ground atop a jumble of roots which dove into the soil below.

The body of the disc was split open like a fruiting mushroom, revealing an interconnected network of gills, stalks and bulbs within. The inside was its own kind of forest, one overflowing with activity as its denizens went about their daily business. All of this was hidden from the sun beneath the top part of the disc, an umbrella-shaped cap whose inside glowed like an immense street lamp.

“That’s a city?” Nikitin asked in awe.

Charlie nodded. “Is it really that different than Manhattan?”

“Yeah. Looks like something you find growing in your sock.”

Jack raised his binoculars and tried to take it all in, but there was just too much to absorb. Charlie was right in a way. The details were foreign, but the shape was the same. It was a living city, with its own congested traffic and bustling neighborhoods. Jack could only see the very edge of it, but he could tell there was a lot going on inside.

Charlie started snapping pictures through his visor, while Jack brainstormed ways to get a closer look. They weren’t going to learn anything useful from the park across the street. He wanted to get into the backyard, or maybe break into the basement if he could.

“I can’t figure it out. How the hell do we get in?” Jack asked.

“I dunno,” Lisa said. “Anyone remember to bring an armor division?”

Nikitin snapped his finger in mock disappointment. “Drat! Left it in my other pants.”

“Yeah, yeah, yuck it up,” Jack said dryly. He wondered why he was always stuck with such smart mouths.

“Usually, you just do like the Romans do.”

“Nice thinking, Charlie,” Nikitin said. “Should we do like the four-armed Romans, or the six-armed ones that float?”

“Point taken.”

The team moved on when Charlie was done taking pictures, keeping to the thick bush at the edges of the alien civilization. They didn’t move particularly fast, and the circle around the city was over sixty kilometers in circumference, so it began to feel like they weren’t getting anywhere.

They got better views of the crops and the creatures tending them. Fields were laid out in rows, filled with unfamiliar plants. Agriculture had never been Jack’s strong suit, and he thought most vegetables looked kind

of alien to begin with, so the fields were at best unsurprising. Of more interest were the creatures tilling the fields, which looked like short, squat versions of the walkers, but with large blades they dragged through the soil. Jack imagined they were also vehicles driven by the skinny white pilots.

The team stopped after a klick, and something in the distance caught Charlie's eye. He flipped down his mask and dialed up his optics. "Hey, how about Romans in hooded robes?"

Jack brought his binoculars back up, and he could just barely make out a small group headed out from the city. There were eight of them walking in single-file, dressed in graphite-colored hooded robes, like futuristic Franciscan monks. "Well, I'll be damned," Jack said.

The monks walked out to a cobblestone circle surrounded by meticulously arranged plants, stood at the edge and began to pray. At least, Jack assumed they were praying. They put their arms out and looked up toward the sun, and just stood that way for a little over twenty minutes.

"That might just work," Jack said as he watched. He turned away from the prayer circle and started looking for nearby cover. He was looking for a place to stage an ambush, and he found it, a thin gouge in the land, maybe a creek, that ran within ten meters of the circle. "Let's consider this a top priority. I want someone watching that circle whenever the sun's up."

They stayed and observed until the sun sat low on the horizon, then finally left back for the base camp

Chapter 35:

Civilian

The alien monks' unerring patterns made them easy targets. During daylight, they came out every three hours to perform their ceremony, which lasted for twenty-two minutes and thirty seconds. Their movements and positions were always precisely the same.

Long distance observation revealed more of their kind in the city, dressed in identical robes and always traveling in groups of eight. Jack decided the robes would make ideal disguises, and he set his sights on acquiring a set.

After a week of watching, the team moved into the nearby ravine, waited for the right moment and then struck in the middle of the monks' prayer session. They did it with knives, their work intentionally messy in order to make it look like a wild animal attack, then dragged the corpses back into the wilderness. The bodies left a trail of amber blood that glimmered in the sun.

In the forest, they stripped the monks and left them for the scavengers to dispose of. They turned out to be yet another new species, not particularly humanoid but close enough for the robes to fit. They were bipedal with backwards hinged knees. Each arm split into two forearms at the elbow, both ending in identical four fingered hands. The head was just a bulb at the top of two thin stalks, carrying a pair of eyes and nothing else. Their mouth and ears were instead located on their slender torso, which was also where their brains were housed.

The fact none of this shocked Jack revealed that his threshold for weird shit had jumped a few notches.

A squad of jackrabbits came out to investigate the disappearance, and they sniffed around and chattered over the evidence for hours before returning to the city. A new choir of monks replaced the originals the very next day, but were now protected by pairs of bored looking jackrabbits who stood off to the side and kept watch.

Back at the base camp, couriers arrived from the North carrying new orbital scans with improved detail. Most were focused on five hot spots arranged in a wide circle around the city's center. Command assumed they

were generators, and they were marked as high priority targets. There was no info about how the generators worked, but their destruction would deal a significant blow, and maybe cause a chain reaction that could take down the entire colony.

Orders were orders. Jack didn't know how well the disguises would hold up under scrutiny, so he planned the infiltration and bombing all in one fell swoop without a test run. If they were discovered, they wouldn't get a second chance. Worse, they'd have the enemy actively searching for them, making any operations in the region significantly more difficult.

On the day of the mission, all forty Bravos gathered at the edge of the wilderness and waited for nightfall. Only eight were going in, while the others secured their escape route, and waited to provide cover fire if things went bad.

The infiltrators were broken into two teams. Jack lead the fire-support team, which included Charlie, Nikitin and Albright, armed with assault rifles and frag grenades, while Trash headed up the demolitions team, each carting around bricks of plastic explosive and detonators. They had enough to blow a dam from what Jack understood, and he hoped it was enough.

Night fell and it was time. They painted their faces and arms matte black, put on their graphite robes and took off across the half-klick between the forest and the city. They made good use of cover, keeping hedge lines and storage containers between themselves and their goal. No sense being seen in the open if they could help it.

Then they came to the great blue city itself, which sat on a bed of roots that held it above the ground. There were gaps between the roots creating natural crawlspaces, and Jack wondered what lived down below. He wondered that in a purely academic sort of way, not in any mood to find out, or even get close. The last thing he wanted was to meet the alien version of a rattlesnake.

They made their way around the perimeter and then headed up one of the wide ramps that connected the inner city to the fields outside. The ramp was much bigger than Jack had originally thought. Logically, he knew how large it was after weeks of careful observation, but that didn't prepare him for the staggering hugeness of it, looking less like machinery and more like a sloping hillside.

Charlie gave him a nudge. "You ready for this?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

“I can take the lead if you want.”

“No. Let’s do this.”

With that, they marched up the ramp single file, and after an uphill hike that felt like an eternity, they were inside. It was instant culture shock. “Keep your heads down,” Jack said, but even he was having a hard time of it.

They moved along, and while everything remained foreign and unbelievable in its own way, Jack thought he was starting to understand what he was looking at. The area was an industrial district, complete with big bulbous buildings that could be warehouses. Another kind of walker lined the streets here, longer and lower to the ground than the ones they knew, with dozens of short, stubby legs supporting multiple pod-compartments. Unless Jack missed his guess, they were tractor-trailers.

flyers filled the air overhead in patterns that mimicked the streets of any large city, but expanded into the third dimension. The fine details of each flyer were slightly different, but they were all basically miniature, open-topped versions of the cuttlefish, zooming around and through the throng of stalagmite-like buildings, and the sprawling network of catwalks which connected them.

The false monks journeyed on, and the industrial district gave way to a business district full of brightly lit store fronts and street vendors loudly hawking their wares. Every alley led to another market overflowing with foot traffic and wafting out strangely delicious smells. They were the smells of fried vegetables and roasted meats.

A residential area came next, complete with terraced stalagmites that were apartment complexes. Parks with oddly complex terrain sat between the apartments, where adolescent jackrabbits played a game like football, but with a weighted rod in place of the ball. One rabbit would fling the staff to another, who would then grip it with the claw on his back and dash across the obstacle-laden field.

Each district was dense in a way that would make even Manhattan in its prime feel jealous, and the traffic grew thicker the deeper they went.

All the while, the infiltrators kept their heads down and did their best to avoid attention. Jack threaded a route that avoided crowds, and even managed to avoid the many street markets. Every now and again, they passed another coven of hooded monks, and they silently waited to be

discovered, but the real monks never motioned to them or paid them any mind.

Too many of Jack's prayers were being answered, and it was starting to make him nervous.

There were many more types of aliens than they'd seen outside. Jackrabbits were plentiful, but the city dwellers were less muscular and sinewy than soldiers, and none wore the black gas-masks. The creatures were playful and lively, and could often be seen talking excitedly and singing in the streets, in brightly colored clothes and jewelry that jingled.

More surprising were the rhinos, who were nearly as common as the jackrabbits. They were so different than the soldiers that Jack didn't recognize them at first. Civilian rhinos were much closer to humans in size and proportion, with four average-sized arms, faintly striped beige skin, and no armor to speak of. Not a single one had an insect attached to its back either, and their clothes always left their blowholes uncovered.

Even after Jack had decided that these striped creatures were the rhinos, he still had trouble connecting the two. The idea that they grow to five times their original weight, and sprout bulletproof armor was simply too fantastic to believe.

There were other species, but none in numbers approaching the rhinos or jackrabbits. There were great tall aliens that stalked through the crowds as a giraffe walks through tall grass, and other hunched-over, skulking creatures that kept to the shadows, but could occasionally be seen darting from one shelter to the next. The strangest thing the Bravos saw was a floating animal with a gelatinous sack for a body, which appeared to be filled with other, smaller creatures swimming around inside of it. He was like a living aquarium, and it was anyone's guess if either he or his inhabitants were intelligent.

They never saw a pilot anywhere, but with the number of vehicles flitting about, their numbers were obviously healthy. It also occurred to Jack after a couple kilometers that he'd seen several groups of monks, but had yet to see any of that species outside of their robes. He filed that away as another mystery he would likely never answer.

Then they came to the generator complex. It was impossible to miss, a massive column of twisting fibers which extended from the floor to the canopy above. It was thicker at either end and thinner in the middle, like a sticky bridge of fluid slowly pulled apart. Glowing amber cables sprouted

everywhere on its surface, and extended out toward the rest of the city like creeping ivy.

The Bravos huddled in the neighborhood just before the generator, where foot traffic grew thin. It wasn't obvious how to get into the facility, or if there even was an entrance. From the looks of things, they might as well have been looking for a door on a tree trunk.

In a hushed voice, Nikitin said, "I don't see a damn doorway, Jack."

"If there's no way in, the mission's a bust, chief. Our charges wouldn't even dent that thing." Trash wasn't a problem solver. He got jobs done when directed, but any deviation from the plan stopped him dead in his tracks. Where he picked up demolition skills before joining the Corps was a total mystery, as was his terrible nickname.

Jack tilted his head back and looked up the great height of the thing. He didn't even want to guess at how tall it was, because it dwarfed every skyscraper he'd ever seen. Still, the glowing cables made for interesting terrain, and there appeared to be plenty of hand-holds and ledges. Did he just think what he thought he thought?

As Jack second guessed his fleeting idea, one of the flyers high above slowed and entered a tunnel in the facility's side. The angle from the floor made the entrance itself invisible.

"Who's got some climbing experience?"

"You didn't just ask that," Nikitin said.

Albright, Trash, and one of the demo men raised their hands. "Good. Looks like there's a docking port for flyers up there. That's where we're getting in. There isn't another option. The rest of you stay behind. Stick to the shadows, and be ready to get the hell out. Clear?"

"Clear," they all said.

Just then, Jack noticed a pair of rhinos walking in their direction and he motioned for his team to shut up. The two creatures, an adult and child, walked right past the circle of false monks and stopped at the street corner a couple paces away. The adult, a female, pulled out a glowing crystal and looked deep into it, while the child stared up at the mess of traffic above.

Then the young rhino turned and looked right at Jack, and he knew it saw his face. Its big, bright eyes showed surprise, and then it smiled and waved to him. It tugged its mother's hand, but Jack raised his finger to his mouth in a silent hush. To his amazement, the motion was understood.

The small rhino giggled and waved again, then its mother put the crystal away and started walking, pulling her child along behind her.

Jack heard Albright's voice in his memory, from the day she dissected the alien specimens. "I haven't identified everything yet, but most of it's more like us than not."

Right at that moment, Jack realized what sort of demon he'd become, and he couldn't shake the thought from his head no matter how hard he tried.

Chapter 36:

Jack and the Beanstalk

The climbing team stripped off their robes and left them folded up on the ground. The disguises wouldn't matter, since a group of monks climbing the generator would be as suspicious as anything else. Fortunately, the generator complex was of little interest to the citizens of the blue city and there was no traffic nearby, flying or on foot. Their chances of being seen were small, and if they were lucky, that would be enough.

Jack didn't like trusting in luck.

All four were former corpsmen with jumpsuits dyed darker colors. Each also wore the standard corps duty pack, which housed a climbing-harness with built in rappelling cable. The hooks allowed corpsmen to latch onto each other and form a human chain, great for climbing but also useful in strong winds and flood waters. A large part of Corps Basic Training was devoted to the harness' effective use.

Albright was the most confident climber and she volunteered to take lead. They all hooked up to her, and then off they went up the side of the giant, twisting structure. It felt like they were making quick work of it, but the entry ports remained a long way off, and they seemed only inches closer after a half-hour.

The surface was covered in handles and was as difficult to climb as a good ladder. Albright supposed the handles were for use in zero-g, and her theory made a lot of sense, but things that made too much sense were often wrong in Jack's experience. Jack's experience was surprisingly cynical.

They fell into a comfortable rhythm, ascent interspersed with short rests in shallow alcoves they found, and thanks to the many hand-holds, they rarely had to backtrack. At each new rest stop, they could see more of the city stretching out beneath them, and Jack was beginning to admire the view. What was foreign and deformed at first was becoming familiar, reminding him not only of Manhattan, but also of Hong Kong and Mumbai. It was a rainbow of brightly colored clothes, spicy smells and strange produce.

After nearly two hours, they came to the entry port, which was a tunnel just barely large enough for one of the flyers to squeeze through, located

half-way between the colony's floor and ceiling.

Once everyone was safely on the ledge, Jack took a good look down and the scale of it struck him with a touch of vertigo. He had a tingle at the back of his knees and a sloshy feeling in his stomach, and then it was gone.

"Hustle up," he said, moving away from the ledge. "Let's get this done and get out of here."

They scurried down the tunnel, and fifty meters later, it opened into a round room full of golden light, brighter than midday.

Jack shielded his eyes and looked for cover. From what little he could see, the room was filled with circles of alabaster columns, and pieces of equipment whose shape he could hardly make out.

The team moved in, ducking behind one column and then the next. After a few moments, Jack's eyes adjusted to the light, and his movements became less frantic. He was reasonably sure they were alone.

"It's a damn sauna in here," Trash grumbled.

Albright said, "No kidding. Seems we found the furnace."

Jack waved the team forward, and idly wondered if they'd find a monster shoveling coal at the center.

The columns were staggered so that they were never in direct light for long, and soon they reached the innermost columns where the heat grew unbearable. Jack had just started thinking about how to proceed when their amazing luck struck again.

They heard the clothes-washer sound of a flyer. The team ducked down into the shadows and did their best to fade into the woodwork. Moments later, a set of eight monks came walking by, their robes shining like glittering gems in the fierce, burning light. As with every other set of monks, they kept their heads down and marched by obliviously.

"I understand the robes," Albright whispered to Jack. "Betcha those guys are nice and cozy with all that heat reflecting off 'em."

Jack was sweating profusely. "Wish I'd known that earlier. I feel like a Christmas roast."

Then Jack heard a sound unlike any other come from the center of the room. Countless warbling tones were layered atop one another, each warping the sounds around them. It was a choir of songbirds singing in chorus through a collection of transforming distortion pedals. If Jack didn't know better, he'd think only a synthesizer could produce a sound so starkly unnatural, so beautifully beyond comprehension.

When he peaked out from behind his column, he saw something even more perplexing than the sound: the eight monks stood around the center of the room, where a miniature sun floated in mid-air surrounded by a cage of the glowing orange cables. The burning ball had grown darker since Jack and his team had arrived, and it was now dark enough to look at directly. The red-orange ball slowly rotated while small tongues of flame arced out from its surface.

The monks had their arms raised toward the tiny sun, like refugees in a war torn land crying for someone to take them away. Their synthesizer sounds grew louder, and the sun darkened in response.

Then the noise stopped and the monks lowered their arms, shrank, slumped down as if energy had been sucked right out of them. They stood there in silence looking at the ball of fire, then turned, headed back to their craft and left.

“What the hell?” Jack asked.

Albright shook her head. “I don’t know, but I wish I had a Geiger counter. Something tells me we shouldn’t stay in here any longer than we have to.”

The sun pulsed, throbbed, and slowly brightened.

The demolitionist had a thoughtful look on his face. “If that’s a fusion furnace,” he said while scratching his head, “this might just work, chief. We take out its containment and the whole reaction goes out of control. Kablooey! Everything in a hundred clicks is black fertilizer.”

“Jack...” The tone of Albright’s voice spoke volumes.

“I know,” he said.

Trash said, “We gotta get a move on.”

Somewhere in the past, Jack was sitting in a packed room full of new recruits. He was lost and angry. “Will we engage civilian targets?” he asked, knowing damn well what the answer would be.

“We don’t have all day,” Trash said urgently, and the insistence in his voice dragged Jack back into the present.

His head was a jumble of thoughts, feelings and emotions. Two images kept assaulting him; one a fresh memory and the other a vision of the future yet to come. The rhino child’s bright eyes held hope for a better tomorrow, then was snuffed out by a white-hot explosion that left nothing behind but a scorch mark.

“We’re aborting,” Jack said.

“What?” Trash barked.

“It’s one thing to take out their power. Deal a blow to their infrastructure, but this... I won’t commit genocide.”

“Genocide? This is justice.” Trash reached into his pack and pulled out his det packs. “If you don’t have the balls, I do.”

Before the last word came out of Trash’s mouth, Jack drew his pistol and leveled it square at his head. “I’d sooner kill you than let you do this, McGrath.”

“What’s your malfunction, Jack?”

Trash continued preparing his packs, and Jack took it to the next level. He flicked off his safety, took a long step forward and pressed the barrel flush against the other man’s skull. “We’re corpsmen, God damn it. We’re better than this. Now put it away before I end you.”

Trash gritted his teeth and stared uncut hatred back at Jack. Then he put the packs away.

Jack lowered the gun and everyone started to breathe again. “This isn’t how we operate. Not ever. No matter how many of us they kill, we don’t turn into monsters.”

Trash looked like he could puke bullets, but he didn’t test Jack’s threat, and it was the right decision. Jack wasn’t bluffing. He’d remembered what he stood for, and he would’ve shot Trash dead.

“So what now? We just bend over and take it? Watch them wipe out the last of us?”

Jack still had the gun in hand, and it felt heavier than he remembered. “No. We fight and survive, but we do it right. Military targets and infrastructure only. I’d rather die by my virtues than live like this.”

Chapter 37:

Detachment

The moment was over, and everything was calm again in the circular generator room. Trash had a twisted grimace on his face, but he dutifully zipped his pack up and slung it back over his shoulder. The insurrection was over.

Jack returned his handgun to its holster. At the same moment, the light in the generator room turned a deep, Cabernet red while the innermost ring of columns slid across the floor, forming a gapless barricade around the miniature sun. A low cry like a giant horn howled across the blue city. None of that seemed like good news.

“What’s going on?” the demoman asked.

Jack’s voice had an edge as sharp as a knife. “We’ve been found out.” He’d followed his conscience, and his luck immediately turned to crap. He didn’t know what message the universe was trying to send him, but he sure he didn’t like it.

Jack rushed back out the entry tunnel and the rest of the team followed. He stopped at the cliff, and when he looked out over the city, he could already see the enemy on their way. Swarms of flyers cut through the air traffic, heading straight for them. All the while, the howl of the giant horn never stopped or faltered.

“What do we do?” Trash asked.

There were too many unknowns, and Jack did his best to process them. He could lay a trap with the explosives and try a pitched battle in the generator room, but there was no way to escape. The enemy outnumbered them by the millions, and would wear them down eventually. It might give Charlie and the others a chance to clear out, though.

The closest flyer was still more than a minute away. “We run. Everybody, back down the wall.”

The team didn’t need to be told twice. Each of them drew their rappelling hooks, latched onto a handle, and dropped over the edge feet first. Their arrestors whined, and with each stop, the team grabbed new handholds, retracted cable and reattached, only to repeat the process again and again.

By the time they reached the bottom, flyers were circling the generator room above and were starting to search in widening circles.

Charlie came out of the shadows with Nikitin and the others in tow. "What the hell did you do up there?"

"Not sure," Jack said, "but they're on to us."

"Ya think?" Nikitin spat sarcastically. "So what now?"

Jack had come to a decision during the trip down, one he didn't particularly like, but it was better than the alternatives. It was a bad plan, but it would get his people out, and that was the only thing that mattered. "Trash, I need your det packs," he said.

"Why?"

"Shut up and hand 'em over."

Trash dug the pale bricks and detonators out of his pack and tossed them to Jack, who stowed them away. "Put on the robes and stay hidden until you hear the first of these go off. Charlie, you take everyone back out the way we came. Meet up with the others at the rendezvous and just keep going."

"What about you?"

"I'm gonna raise a ruckus."

Charlie got in his face. "Don't be stupid, Jack. We're all leaving. Just need to be sneaky about it."

"That ship sailed, and you know it. They won't stop searching until they find someone, and if they don't find anyone here, they'll start looking outside and we're all fucked. This way, you all at least have a chance. Now follow my damn orders."

"Yeah, and no one's going to notice there's only seven of us?"

"Who can count with bombs going off?"

Jack was ready to punch his little brother in the mouth, but it didn't come to that. Charlie nodded his head solemnly and started handing out the robes. "You heard the man. Put 'em on."

When Jack turned to Albright, she unshouldered her rifle. The doctor was a five-foot commando again. "I'm with you."

Jack walked over to her, took her in his arms and kissed her. Every inch of her was tense, but she melted and then it seemed to last forever. Jack pulled away, and said, "Like hell you are."

"But I..."

"They need you, Lisa. And I need you to survive. It's what I do."

She was stunned, but Jack wouldn't budge on this. He could sacrifice his own life if he had to, but not hers. Not now.

He gave her one more gentle kiss on the forehead and said, "I'll see you again. I promise."

And he was gone before she could say another word. Jack ran hard, his feet pounding tiled floor, and the taste of her still on his lips. He flew out from their hiding spot and circled the generator tower; when he was ninety degrees around the bend, he turned and bolted off into parts unknown.

Jack came to his first stop fifty meters on. He pulled a putty-like demo pack out and attached it to a shack, then jammed a detonator inside. He set the timer for ten minutes, set his watch-alarm for nine-forty-five, and bolted off running again.

He hit a residential sector, pulled the rifle from his back and started to yell. Crowds of aliens ran away in terror, like a tiger had escaped from the zoo and was rampaging through the streets.

"Get down!" he yelled as he began to fire. He aimed high to avoid the bystanders, and his rounds sparked impotently off the stalagmite buildings. The loud bark of fire had the desired effect, sending the innocents scattering, and he continued running right on past.

He didn't bother to look over his shoulder. There was no need. The cyclic sound of the flyers overhead was enough to let him know he had their attention. Another few paces on, he heard soldier rhinos grunting and galloping, and he knew the ground forces were onto him as well.

The residential area gave way to a market, and Jack's howling madman routine turned heads wherever he went. Crowds parted before him like the sea before Moses, and he sprinted on, driven by an endless surge of adrenaline.

Jack decided to explore a bit. He cut between two buildings and loped up a ramp to the suspended catwalks. It was a whole new part of the city made of branching beams, with its own set of store fronts and signs scrawled in unfamiliar characters. Yet more levels waited above.

Then the game got interesting. This level was too tight for flyers, and they stayed high up above, but now every corner held a set of rhinos stampeding in his direction. Escape routes closed off all around.

Jack heard a skittering noise behind him and instinctively hit the deck just in time for a jackrabbit to go flying overhead. The small creature yelped when it missed him, and clawed at the floor as it slid away.

He turned his head back and saw two more of the fast creatures bounding his way. Both leaped into the air at the same time, and with a spin, he dodged one and flung the other off the catwalk onto the ground floor below.

“Toro!” He shouted, before sprinting off once again.

Option after option disappeared, forcing his choices until he found himself on a long bridge with no offramps, and nothing nearby but empty air. Enemy forces moved into position on either end. They’d snared him.

He fired a couple rounds toward the far end as a warning, and the enemy ducked back. Then he turned and opened fired on his pursuers, sending them scattering. He stopped when the magazine ran dry.

“Now what?” he asked himself.

The alarm on his watch went off, and an idea sparked in his head. It would require pinpoint timing, and it was the most dangerous and stupid thing he’d ever considered. He worried that it might just work.

Jack pulled a second demo pack out, drove a detonator into it and set the timer for fifteen seconds then dropped in the middle of the catwalk. The whole process took him no more than five seconds.

With his rifle quiet, the enemies at either end of the bridge started moving forward, and Jack flicked his head back and forth, watching both groups advance. When they were thirty meters off, a loud, hollow boom registered in the distance. His signal to move.

All eyes turned toward the explosion, and Jack made good on the opportunity. He pulled his climbing hook out and hurdled the guard-rail, barely managing to latch onto it as he flew over, then plummeted toward the ground.

The arrestor slowed his descent, and when he reached the bottom, he released it and dove across the ground. At the same time, the catwalk above exploded, and the entire bridge collapsed in a billowing cloud of dust. The shock wave struck him like a wrecking ball, driving him another ten meters across the smooth floor, where he slammed into a wall and stopped.

Bruised, bloodied and disoriented, he wobblingly tried to stand, but only slipped and fell back down. The cool ground felt so nice against his face that he couldn’t imagine trying ever again. In his dizzy head, he drifted between the blue alien city and the memory of a terrible hang-over, when he’d lain on a cool, smooth bathroom floor.

During one of his fits of consciousness, he thought he heard rhino troopers grunting, and when he opened his eyes and looked around, the ugly bastards were standing over him in a circle. They spoke back and forth, probably trying to decide what to feed him to.

Everything was dim, and Jack realized he didn't have long. He couldn't think straight. He numbly pawed at his chest and found what he thought was a gun. He pulled the weapon out of its holster, fumbled at the hammer until it clicked, then aimed upward and fired. With a thump, a bright red-orange flare arced into the sky.

"Damn," he said. It wasn't the first time he mistook the flare gun for a weapon. After a moment, his frustration disappeared and he slipped into heavy darkness. None of the dreams he found there were pleasant.

Chapter 38:

The View From Above

Jack was confused when he woke up. Really confused. He'd been confused before, like when he got to the analogy section of his college entrance exams and couldn't figure out how "dispatch" might relate to "sluggishness". This was worse. If anything, he was roughly as confused as the time his roommate gave him a funny mushroom, and he spent the rest of the day trying to figure out how walls worked.

The most confusing part was that he was still alive.

His whole body hurt, and it felt like someone was trying to pull his arms out of their sockets. Worse, the room around him didn't make a lick of sense. The walls were in the wrong place and made of green webs. There was something oddly like a door nearby, but it was attached to the ceiling. Everything was completely wrong in ways he couldn't understand.

Jack wanted to throw up, but the empty pit in his stomach told him it'd be uneventful.

He couldn't move. Cold metal shackles had every part of his body pinned, and struggling against them was useless. He didn't bother to call for help, since something terrible might respond.

So he lay there, breathing and aching, waiting for whatever the hell would happen next. Time melted away without any way to measure its passage. He might have lain there for hours, days or weeks for all he knew. It was all the same. A single, unending moment, punctuated only by the procession of mangled memories, and the short fits of sleep that interrupted them.

He thought back over the strange journey that brought him to that room. He remembered the life he used to have, all of the weird and wonderful places he'd seen, and the grateful faces he'd helped along the way.

That life existed once upon a time in a storybook that had since been burnt to ash and scattered to the wind. His life was gone, replaced by a world he hardly recognized. A world that had been crushed, eviscerated and torn limb from limb. In its smouldering remains, Jack had changed as well. He became someone different. Someone harder, who killed efficiently and without remorse, over and over until it became clear the killing could never

sate him. It would never heal the wound, or quiet his mourning for the lifetime left behind.

Of this new life, which had hit a dead-end in some screwy alien prison, Jack knew only one thing: whatever changes might come would be for the worse. And after an eternity alone with his thoughts, Jack's prediction came true.

The strange door in the ceiling opened like denim unraveling, revealing a blinding light behind it. Three silhouettes walked through the portal, and continued down the opposite wall. Jack stared at the visual puzzle for a few seconds, until his head straightened out and he figured it out. He'd been hanging from the ceiling all this time, and his captors were on the floor beneath him.

Two rhinos stood with their massive autocannons at the ready, on either side of a new kind of alien. This species was much more human-like, but in gangly, funhouse mirror proportions. He wore a form fitting uniform that covered him from head to toe, made from some slick material in midnight-blue and slate grey. The double-breasted jacket reminded Jack of fascist armies, and the leathery mask looked like something from a kinky sex shop. A white crescent crossed one eye.

The fascist alien's movements were pin-point specific, and fluid without excess. He stepped to the center of the room and stopped beneath Jack, then looked up at the prisoner and carefully examined him. Apparently satisfied, he raised his right arm and tapped commands into some kind of wrist computer.

He looked back up at Jack and began to speak. The sounds were familiar, and Jack realized the alien was speaking a human language. It was a form of Arabic, one of many languages that Jack hardly spoke a word of.

"I don't speak Arabic, asshole."

The alien looked back to his computer and entered some more commands. Jack couldn't see the display very well, but he caught streams of text flying by in a rainbow of colors.

"Subject language identification English. Understand does you thing I say?"

"Yeah, sure. Fuck off, ya sack of shit. You understand that?"

"Dialect North American. Variety Midwestern?" The alien's sentence structure left much to be desired, but his accent was good and improving

with every word. He had only a hint of something awkward in his pacing, like an autistic child.

“Pacific States Alliance,” Jack said.

“Thanking you.” He tapped some information into his computer, and then turned his full attention back to Jack. “Now we is capable to understand each’s other. I to fabricate questions, and you are making answer.”

“And if I don’t feel much like making answer?”

The response was one word. “Pain.”

The alien’s sharp eyes studied Jack intently, analyzing every movement, twitch, and wayward glance. He felt like he was being vivisected.

“You is understanding? Good. We commence questions. What name is?”

“Go to fucking hell.”

The alien shook his head, then removed a short baton from his belt. He made sure Jack got a good look at the weapon, then he thrust it into Jack’s armpit quick as a cobra strike. Jack’s whole side exploded in strobing, lightning flashes of pain that streaked out across his chest and arm.

Jack gritted his teeth and grunted. His whole face twisted into a knot.

“I was studied species acutely, and I having found many fifty productive nerve intersections. It is introduction. Pain will to increase during resistance continuing. You is understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I repeating, what name is?”

“Pretty sure I told you to go to hell.”

The baton struck in the exact same spot, but the pain was worse. It was an unstoppable flood, and his arm spasmed. When it finally subsided, Jack was struck by a memory of his karate teacher showing the kids a couple pressure points, talking about how effective they could be when used properly.

“You is challenge. Is soldier yes? Screaming not, but will to scream soon. I to begin new nerve package, and true pain then.”

Jack was drooling, but he couldn’t do a thing about it.

“Name unimportant, Nefrem. Reveal location is battle fleet.”

Jack’s chest was twitching, and he was having trouble speaking. “I don’t... don’t think that... made it through the translator.”

“Where location battle fleet is!? Nefrem fleet must to return. When is return?”

“What are you talking about?”

The alien reached up and grabbed Jack’s throat. “When?” it demanded.

“I don’t understand,” he gurgled.

A deep, throaty growl came out of the alien, and his grip on Jack’s throat tightened. “When?” the alien kept saying over and over again, until Jack slipped back into darkness, where more twisted dreams awaited him.

Chapter 39:

Interrogation

Jack's life took on a peculiar sort of rhythm. They left him alone in his cell to stew for long stretches, until such time as the fascist alien bastard came back to question and torture him some more. During each questioning session, he was pushed up to and past his threshold for pain. He would pass out and find a small measure of peace, only to awaken later and repeat the process all over again.

Jack felt like Prometheus chained to his rock.

His resolve only lasted so long, and he started to answer questions, mingling truth and lies, losing track of where one began and the other ended. Sometimes, he made a game of giving the most ridiculous answers possible, speaking at length about an army called the Lost Boys who had a base hidden in Never Never Land, or the terrorist leader Christopher Robin and the suicide missions he launched from the 100 Acre Wood. When he ran out of kids' books, he turned to movies, spinning stories about British super spies, flying Chinese monks, and space police with lenses attached to their hands.

The interrogator listened intently but never bought a word of it, and Jack discovered that the quality of his story telling had zero effect on the amount of torture he received.

He had no idea how much time passed or was passing, and he lost count of how many sessions he endured. The only change from one day to the next was the interrogator's grasp of English, which improved at a startling rate but remained oddly stilted.

Throughout it all, Jack somehow refused to divulge his name despite whatever pain he was subjected to; it was his alone, and he wouldn't let them have that piece of him. The interrogator addressed him only as Nefrem, and whenever Jack asked about the word, he was introduced to yet another pressure point, offering its own unique flavor of agony. The interrogator thought Jack was playing dumb, and no amount of arguing could convince him otherwise.

Their relationship was a tense one, yet they somehow grew comfortable with one another. Jack spent more time howling and slobbering than he ever

could have imagined, but the interrogator didn't relish the work; he performed it clinically, without joy or satisfaction. He even displayed mercy on occasion, and Jack thought he might be able to forgive the interrogator. Those times didn't come often.

Whenever Jack was left alone, he prayed. He hadn't since he was a child, and it was awkward at first. The prayers started out formal, complete with all of the 'holy father's, 'art's and 'thou's he could remember, but soon he was talking to God like an old friend returned from a long trip. When his prayers went unanswered, he bargained, hoping that smaller requests might be granted where larger ones were ignored, but that went nowhere quickly. Finally, the prayers disappeared and he just talked to himself, because unlike God, he was polite enough to reply.

Facing a future that promised nothing but pain, Jack began to wish for death. He just wanted it to end, and he considered sharing this fact with the interrogator. He wasn't sure if the masked alien might grant his wish, or if it was exactly the submission they'd been working toward all along.

Jack never revealed his desire to die, and the torture continued unabated. When reality grew unbearable, he retreated into ever more complex fantasies, managing to convince himself the whole ordeal was just a terrible dream, and that he'd wake up back in sunny San Jose at any moment. He imagined lying in his king-size bed with Jess snoring beside him, then sneaking out to read the newspaper over a glass of orange juice with the morning sun breaking through the trees outside his window.

The simple, prosaic details had the most gravity. They pulled him down into the dream, and made it feel more real.

He could just about taste the tangy-sweet orange juice and feel its squishy pulp on his tongue when a surprising jolt of pain thrust him back into real reality. Back in his cell, strapped to the ceiling like a modern art exhibit, while the interrogator stared up at him from below.

"You drifted away for a moment, Nefrem."

"So sorry about that," Jack said through gritted teeth, "What was the question?"

"I don't believe I asked one," the interrogator said. "Tell me, where did you go?"

"Dunno know what you mean."

"When you were off just now. Where did you go?"

“Home,” Jack said. The word evoked feelings that were strange and out of place now. They were the phantom feelings of an amputated life.

The interrogator took a seat on the floor. That was a first. He was acting particularly strange this session, and Jack thought he should be on guard for trickery, but he didn’t have the energy to be on guard against anything. His constant state of half-starved delirium made anything more complex than basic sarcasm impossible.

“That’s the first question you’ve answered truthfully.”

“No one’s perfect.”

The interrogator was deep in thought. Jack considered spitting on him, but doubted he could muster enough saliva.

“I have determined after rigorous experimentation that we are in a deadlock. An impasse. You cannot be broken by pain alone, and for that, I commend you.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“I suspect that you have already resigned yourself to death. Perhaps you consider yourself dead already, and your body nothing but an empty shell.”

“Maybe I just like the pain.”

The interrogator let out a queer laugh. “Possible but unlikely. You’ve shown no signs of arousal during our sessions. I suspect that you might fold were I to mutilate you, but I find that option unsavory.”

“Don’t have the balls to cut me up?”

“I have employed mutilation before, but only in dire circumstances. I find such tactics dishonorable and morally reprehensible. They are not to be considered lightly.”

“I see. And this shit is just business as usual?”

“Essentially. Pain is fleeting and impermanent. With time, the memory fades and the mind heals. Not so with mutilation. It renders parts of the subject forever unusable, and the possibility of total psychological collapse is always close at hand. It’s a point of no return, beyond which atonement becomes unreachable.”

“Nice to know you have limits.”

“All life has limits, Nefrem. Even you.” The interrogator said things like that often, and they always took Jack by surprise. Whatever these Nefrem were, the interrogator held them in high regard. They were legendary, and Jack held the same status by association.

“So, what now?”

The interrogator considered. "If you give me what I want, I will release you. To the outside or death, whichever is your preference."

"What do you want?"

"Information."

"I don't have any." Jack spaced his words deliberately, like speaking to an unruly child.

"But I know you do. Your species is guarding a secret, and I will uncover it by any means necessary. If you will not assist me, then one of the others will."

Jack's mind raced, but he tried not to let it show. What others? Could the rest of his team have been captured? No, he told himself, he was being played. He retreated from the thought, and stuck to his guns.

"Tell me what I wish to know, Nefrem. Tell me where your battle fleet has gone, and when it will return."

"I am not a Nefrem," Jack said, "I'm a free man."

"Then we are done," the interrogator said. He stood and walked from the room, saying, "Farewell. You will not see me again."

The bastard left Jack alone in silence, and for some reason he would never fully understand, he began to weep. His body quaked. Tears ran down his nose and dropped to the floor below, where they formed a shallow puddle. He cried until the darkness once again came to take him away.

Chapter 40:

Solitary

The next time Jack opened his eyes, he was on the floor of a different room, wearing rags too threadbare to hang himself with. The place was stark and empty, with flat, smooth walls in perfectly inert grey. The only noticeable details were a hole in the floor for waste, a small dish attached to one wall that was constantly full of water, and a deep slot beside it just wide enough to fit a hand inside.

This was Jack's new world.

Stuff came out of the slot every now and again that turned out to be food. It was a curious smelling pile of lukewarm chunks that may have been meat, vegetable or neither. It came in different colors, but always tasted the same.

His first attempts at eating ended in vomiting, but it wasn't a problem with the food. Jack had been fed intravenously for so long that his stomach wasn't yet up to the task, but he kept at it, and by the fourth meal he kept some down. Things improved from there.

He suspected the food was dispensed on a timed interval, but he had no way to know for sure. Regardless, he used bits of each meal to mark the walls so he could have at least an idea of how much time had passed.

Otherwise, there was a perplexing sameness to his days. No one ever came to check on him, and he never heard anything outside. The cell was his own personal purgatory, and after scouring every last millimeter of it, he decided there could be no escape. He couldn't even figure out how they got him in.

His body was a damn wreck. The time spent hanging from the ceiling had taken its toll, leaving him weak, emaciated, and covered from head to toe in deep, discolored bruises. His shoulders were especially sore from holding his weight, and it took some time before he could raise his arms without severe discomfort. A strong breeze could have blown him over, and restoring his health became a top priority.

Each 'day', he woke up, exercised as much as he could, then rested and ate. After his meal, he exercised to his limit again, then broke for his second meal, and returned for one last exercise session, this time only stopping

when he collapsed. He was always so exhausted by then that sleep came easily.

The interrogator's torture had altered Jack's relationship with pain, and he found himself working straight through exhaustion and muscle fatigue, right up to the point when he literally couldn't move anymore. As time passed, that point stretched further and further out, until he could work himself virtually non-stop.

In truth, he wasn't just used to the pain; he craved it. Trapped in that grey box, it was the only thing he had left, and he never let it far out of his grasp. It was the last thing grounding him to reality.

His life went on like this through one-hundred and thirty seven meals, each day the same as the one before it, and then it changed. He passed out as usual in a pool of his own sweat, but when he awoke, he wasn't alone.

The other man was huddled in a ball against the wall, shivering even though the room was stuffy and warm. He was dressed in rags like Jack's, and was both badly bruised and malnourished. His gaunt physique reminded Jack of old pictures showing Jewish prisoners in German concentration camps.

The man had his knees drawn up and his head buried in them. He was sobbing, and Jack couldn't get a look at his face.

Jack was so surprised, he didn't know what to do. He felt like his space had been invaded and he had a powerful urge to attack, followed quickly by a sense of self-disgust that left him confused, and ultimately silent.

So Jack went about his daily business and tried to pretend nothing had changed. He stretched until he felt good and limber, then dropped to the floor and did push-ups. After working up a good sweat, he stood, spread his feet and lowered himself into a horse stance, then stood there until his quads felt like they might catch fire.

Meanwhile, the other man sat on his side of the room. He never looked up or pulled his face away from his knees. He did nothing but sob for hours on end.

Then lunch time came. The slot in the wall produced a pile of multi-colored food chunks, which Jack attacked voraciously. He stuffed his cheeks full like a chipmunk, and was piling more food in when he stopped himself. He decided to be more than just an animal in a cage.

He grabbed a handful of food-bits and carried them over to the other prisoner. "Hey," he said. It didn't come out easily. He hadn't spoken in so

long he could hardly remember how.

The other man didn't respond.

"Hey, you should eat," Jack said. His words were hurried and sloppy. He sounded like a caveman. "Gotta keep yer strength up."

The other man finally looked up with yellow discolored eyes, and a face just as gaunt and wasted as his body.

Jack held out the food. "Gotta eat. Need strength to fight 'em."

The yellow-eyed man reached out with a shaking hand, took the food and returned to hiding behind his knees. It was a first step, and Jack returned to his own side of the cell, mindful not to push too hard.

He exercised until dinner came, then again portioned out food and brought it to the other man, who took it and went back to hiding behind his knees.

Jack finished his own food fast and skipped that evening's exercise regimen. He tried to sleep with one eye open but didn't get much rest, only managing to sleep for short bursts before waking in fits of heart-thumping paranoia. It was hard to be sure, but he didn't think the other guy slept much either.

The next day, he went about his morning exercises as usual until lunch rolled around, and then made another attempt at diplomacy. He gathered up a handful of food and delivered it to the huddled-up man, and said, "Heya, food time."

The other grunted and took it.

"You speak English?"

The man's eyes were full of fear and confusion. He stared at Jack for a long time while he nibbled at the food like a rat. "A little," he finally said.

"Hey. That's great. Really great. I'm Jack. What's your name?"

The other glanced around like he thought someone else might be listening. "Kai," he said. "My name's Kai."

"Please to meetcha, Kai."

Jack had known a fellow named Kai who was from Finland. He looked at this new Kai, and he honestly couldn't figure out what ethnicity the guy might be. He had the most forgettable face Jack had ever seen. "Are you from Finland?" he asked.

"Yeah. Puhutko suomea?"

"What? Um... I don't speak Finnish."

"Oh."

Silence, and Jack was kind of glad for it. He didn't remember conversations being such a damn struggle. "So... How'd you get here?"

Kai shook his head. "Don't want to talk about it."

"That's right, right. Okay. Sorry. But you're okay, right?"

"Yeah."

"Well... ummm," Jack droned, "I uhhh... I'm just gonna go back to doin' what I was doin'. Stay cool, right? Right."

Jack didn't used to repeat himself so much before his incarceration. He'd have to work on that.

He went back to his exercise, and attacked it with a renewed vigor. It'd been months since he last saw another human being, and he never imagined how important other people were to him. Better still, he'd made some headway this time. The sense of accomplishment was more filling than a home cooked meal.

When dinner rolled around, Kai met him at the dispenser and they both ate like ravenous animals. The feeding frenzy might have lacked culture, but it was better than being alone. Anything short of torture was better than being alone, and over the following weeks, things improved.

Chapter 41:

Comrade

"...and when the time came, I couldn't do it. I refused to have millions of deaths on my head, alien or not. In return for my mercy, I ended up here."

"No kidding. What did you do before the invasion?"

"I was ERC," Jack said, but Kai looked confused. Then Jack was confused, too. He was sure everyone knew about the ERC. "Emergency Response Corps? Global do-gooders. Firefighters and medics and stuff."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. Didn't recognize the name."

"S'alright."

"You were a firefighter?"

Jack shook his head and made big motions with his hands. "No, no, no. Those guys are crazy. The smokejumpers especially. Man, skydiving and firefighting. Might as well jam your hand in a blender. No, I was search and rescue. Tracked down lost hikers and mountain climbers. That kinda stuff."

"A lot of need for that?"

"Some. Not really. We spent most of our time backing up other teams, like those crazy ass smokejumpers."

Kai let out an awkward chuckle, then got a weird look on his face.

Jack said, "What? Why are you giving me that look?"

"I don't know. I thought you were a soldier for some reason."

"Nope. Not until the shit hit the fan, at least. Used to be against war of any kind. Hurting people, pain and suffering. That stuff was the enemy. I was a true believer, but the invasion changed my outlook I guess."

"True believer?"

"In the mission, man. I helped people, and it's all I wanted to do. I didn't care who. Just help 'em, ya know? It was a different time."

"Yeah. Ever changing world, right?"

"How about you, Kai? What'd you used to do?"

"A lot of things. Construction mostly. I was building an offshore drilling platform when it happened."

"Musta been nice. Out on the oceans and all that. The bastards probably didn't pay much attention to you guys."

“Not at first. Took them months to come out for us. Where were you when it happened?”

“In the sky.”

“What?”

“Sorry. The Corps... they flew us into China after the first strike, while the invasion was still happening. We didn’t know what the hell was going on, and next thing I know, I’m in a busted ass helicopter falling out of low orbit.”

“Intense.”

“Yeah, I guess so. We crashed in the dust cloud, and hit the ground running. Just kept moving and gathering survivors, hoping to find some place that wasn’t toast. We saw so many dead, though.” Corpses piled up in Jack’s head. “So damn many dead.”

“I’m sorry,” Kai said.

“No. No, it’s alright. They... they didn’t have to survive this crap. They were the lucky ones.”

Kai nodded, and then neither spoke for a long time. It had taken them a while to get to this point, and Jack suspected Kai had suffered more torture than he had. The man was just short of catatonic when he arrived, but after the first week, he came back to life. He was a fast healer, too. Bruises had already faded to hints of their former glory, and he didn’t look half as gaunt. His eyes were still discolored, but Jack chalked that up to allergies or malnutrition.

“Listen,” Kai said quietly and moved closer, “did they ever ask you about the... the Nefrem?”

Jack couldn’t figure out why Kai was acting so cloak and dagger. Maybe he knew something about the prison cells that Jack didn’t. “Constantly,” he said, and shuddered at the memory of the torture sessions. “Wish I had any damn idea what a Nefrem was. It’d make stonewalling them that much more satisfying.”

“Yeah.”

“And all that talk about a battle fleet. Did he mean in space?”

“I guess.”

“I just don’t get it,” Jack said. “I mean, if we had a secret fleet, wouldn’t we have used it to protect ourselves? These sons of bitches roll over us in five minutes and then have the gall to ask where our battle fleet is. It’s like

kicking a three year old and then demanding his car keys. I figured he was just messing with my head.”

“Trying to keep us off guard? Makes sense.”

“I don’t know what the hell else it coulda been.”

Kai had a particularly dead look in his eyes. “Who knows. Maybe it’s a case of mistaken identity.”

Jack froze for a second, then laughed so hard it hurt. “Oh God, that’s rich. You, my friend, officially have the bleakest outlook in the whole damned universe.”

Kai asked, “How do you figure?”

“How do I figure? So, big bad space invaders drops trou on our planet and shit all over us. It’s one thing if they’re looking for a new home, or they’re on some kind of religious crusade, out slaughtering infidels, or get this... maybe they’re just mean bastards who can’t stand the sight of us. I can believe any of that. But blotting out ten billion lives by mistake? Like a filing error or something? That would be the most depressing thing in the history of damn depressing things.”

Kai smiled. “I guess you’re right.”

“Truth is, I’ve got my own theory about why they’re here.”

“Really? Do tell.”

Jack looked at Kai with a steely gaze, his eyes burning with a cold fire, and he beckoned the other man forward. When Kai was close, Jack whispered, “They were evicted.”

“I don’t follow.”

“From their last planet. They missed rent a couple months in a row, and the landlord was finally like, dude, get the hell out.”

The look in Kai’s eyes said he wasn’t sure if Jack was serious or not. A breath later, they both erupted in laughter.

“Think he turned the heat off first? Like a subtle hint?”

“Naw,” Jack said. “They just woke up one morning with all their clothes floating in orbit. And I’ll tell you this, they sure as shit didn’t get their security deposit back.”

And they both laughed some more. Jack laughed so hard he had tears in his eyes. Then that silence returned.

“Anyway, I’m gonna try to get some sleep. I’ll catch you in the morning, alright?”

Kai nodded, and Jack headed back over to his side of the cell.

“Hey Jack, can I ask you one last thing?”

“Shoot.”

“What... What’s the biggest mistake you ever made?”

“I dunno. I’ve made some whoppers in my time.”

“Just pick one.”

“Fine. When I was a little punk-ass back in high school, I used to street race with friends. It was dumb, but ya know, we were kids. This one night, the rain is falling just a little bit, and suddenly I’m out of control. Wheels are spinning, making a God awful racket, and the back end gets loose. I pound on the breaks and the whole car starts to slide. I’m screwed. I’m screaming, my buddy Kyle is yellin’ in the passenger seat, and then I don’t really remember what happened. I wake up and the car’s in a ditch. Kyle’s bleeding all over the place.”

“Did he die?”

“No. Someone in the other car was smart enough to call an ambulance, and they got to him in time. It was close, though.”

“So everything worked out alright?”

“I guess. I mean, I almost lost a good friend and for what? For nothing. For being a stupid kid.”

“What came of it?”

“Kyle stayed in the hospital for a few weeks, and I got community service. We both ended up stronger for it. Really changed my life, come to think of it.”

“How?”

“They put me on a suicide hotline, of all things. I was sullen and bitchy about it at first, but then something changed. I started listening to people, and it was the first time I felt like I had a purpose. Like I was doing good in the world. That led me to the Corps.”

“Your whole career is just making up for a guilty conscience, then?”

“That’s one way to look at it. See if I waste a perfectly good inspirational story on you again.”

“Alright. Tell me another way to look at it?”

“There’s a couple different angles. Maybe I found my true calling, or maybe I learned there was value in trying to make things right. Maybe I found myself on a career track and just went where it led me. Maybe... maybe I was totally infatuated with a girl in the call center, and chased her tail right into the Corps.”

“Which is it?”

“A combination. Answers are rarely simple, my friend. So, what was your biggest mistake?”

Kai was quiet for a long while. “Something worse. Something a lot worse.”

Jack didn’t know what his new friend was hiding, but the man’s remorse left a sour smell in the air. “Listen... No matter what you did, the important thing is who you become in the wake of it. Usually, I’d say it’s never too late to make it right, but... well, it may be too late to make it right.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Jack.”

“No problem. G’night, Kai.”

“Night.”

Chapter 42:

The Wake of It

Kai was gone when Jack woke up the next morning. That should have told him something, but he was too busy trying not to let it get to him. He tried to take it in stride, and was partially successful. Only partially. Against his own better judgment, he'd become attached to the guy, even though either one could disappear at any moment. One of them had.

Jack found it odd that he couldn't quite picture Kai's face, even after spending weeks trapped together in an empty room, and it troubled him. He felt heartless for not remembering. Inhuman. He decided that Kai must have had the single most forgettable face in the world. It was the only rational explanation.

Even though Jack and God were on the outs again, he said a small prayer for his doughy-faced Finnish friend and hoped for the best. Then he went back to his routine of merciless exercise, and tried to think nothing else of it. He was partially successful in that as well. Working himself to slobbering exhaustion certainly helped.

Then, shortly after his dinner meal, the inexplicable happened. Jack was sitting on the floor with his back to the wall, and the opposite wall melted away like a sheet of ice suddenly hit by a blast furnace.

The fascist alien interrogator stood in the opening.

Jack didn't waste any time. His opportunity had come. The one he'd been training for. He propelled himself up from the ground and scrambled toward the enemy, fists swinging. His first blow landed with a loud crack and the alien's head jerked to the side. The second fist crashed into the alien's gut, and it felt like hitting concrete.

Even in his blind fury, Jack realized he wasn't having any effect. The alien stood unperturbed, no more wounded than if Jack had splashed him with lukewarm water. It was the most insulting thing possible. It made Jack feel weak and powerless.

"Why won't you fight back?" he growled. His arm tightened and exploded, charged with every last ounce of his strength. "Fight me!"

The alien shrugged the blow off just as he had the others. "Don't you think I've hurt you enough?" he asked.

Jack didn't quite know how to answer that. The alien had hurt him more than enough, but this wasn't how he imagined things turning out. In his dreams, they would clash and fight like savage animals, only to perish with their hands at each other's throats.

"I offer you two options," the interrogator said, "Kill me if you like. I won't resist. Or I can lead you out of this place. You will not escape without my assistance. The choice is yours."

Escape. The mere thought of it hurt. Jack had banished that idea from his mind so long ago he couldn't even imagine it anymore. This had to be some kind of trap, but what if it wasn't?

"Why?" The word barely escaped his mouth.

"There's no time to explain right now. I'll answer your questions once we're outside, but we must leave now. Decide, Jack Hernandez." The alien held out Jack's handgun, handle first, and offered it to him.

Jack snatched the gun out of the alien's gloved hand, pulled back the slide and inspected the chamber. There was a copper jacketed round sitting inside. He released the slide and it clacked back into place, then he raised the gun up and placed it against the interrogator's head.

The alien didn't so much as twitch.

Jack's finger slid to the trigger. The metal was cool to the touch. It begged for him to do it. It cried out for Jack to end the miserable creature's existence, so he could never hurt anyone again.

Jack lowered the gun.

"I hope you made the right decision," the interrogator said.

"So do I."

The alien stepped aside and motioned to a pile of clothes against the wall. "I brought your things. Dress quickly, then follow me. We must leave while the guard detail is being changed."

It took Jack less than thirty seconds to discard his dirty rags and climb back into his underclothes and jumpsuit. In another ten, his holsters and duty pack were fastened and the assault rifle was slung across his back. He felt like a different man. He felt a bit like himself again.

He slid the handgun into its holster and said, "Let's go."

The interrogator led a winding route through the building, passing huge blocks honeycombed with cells just like Jack's. The hallways were empty, and the guard stations abandoned. The creature ran effortlessly, and Jack struggled just to keep up.

They reached the rooftop, and Jack was struck with vertigo. The great blue city stretched out in all directions, and he felt lost, dizzy and nauseous all at the same time. He buckled over and started breathing deeply.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Jack said as he stood back up. “Been cooped up in a shoe box too long. It’s a lot to take in all at once.”

“You must recover quickly. We’re not yet in the clear.”

The rooftop was circular, with stables around the outside housing open-topped flyers, each attached to a hose full of greenish fluid. “You gonna fly one of these things?”

The interrogator shook his head. “No. I am unable to operate Yuon Kwon.”

“So it’s a dead-end then. What the hell?”

“You must fly it.”

“Come again?” Jack asked incredulously.

“Your species possesses all of the organs necessary to interface with Yuon Kwon.”

“That doesn’t make any damn sense,” Jack said.

“I wish I could disagree with you.” The interrogator turned and jogged toward one of the flyers and waved Jack on with his hand. “Come. We must hurry, Jack.”

Jack followed. They climbed into the flyer, the inside of which was much like the walker Jack had inspected in the field. After a moment, he noticed a distinct difference, though. This one was alive. The walls were warm to the touch, and when he reached out to touch it, the creature cooed.

“Hurry.”

“What? How do I do this?”

“Climb into the pilot’s cradle. It will adjust to you, and...”

“And what?”

“I’m not sure. If we’re lucky, you’ll figure it out. We must hurry, or we won’t make the rendezvous.”

Jack stepped to the front where the empty cradle hung open. If this was all an intricate trap, Jack could imagine easier ways for the interrogator to kill him.

He rolled up his sleeves and slowly lowered himself in. The inside was warm and humid, with a musky odor that wasn’t entirely unpleasant. It reminded Jack of reaching into an open wound. Then it quivered and

cinched down tight, while insectoid arms gripped him around the midsection.

“This is disgusting.” His voice was muffled.

“Jack...”

“I don’t know what do.”

Something flashed, and Jack had blind spots like he’d just looked at the sun. He blinked his eyes and tried to clear them. There was another flash more intense than the first. “Something’s happening,” he said.

When the third flash struck, Jack experienced something strange. The strangest thing in his life. Even weirder than his stint with those mushrooms. He touched another creature’s mind and saw through its eyes.

“It’s working,” he thought he said. He wasn’t sure if he said it or thought it. Things had gotten messy.

“Can you get us airborne?” The interrogator’s voice had a weird echo.

“I think so,” he said, and then he made it happen. Jack felt the fin around the edge of himself spin up, the cycling sound filling the air, and the flyer climbed out of its stall. The attached hose tugged back for a moment, but its connector snapped away and he was free.

“Good. Now take us toward those towers, then head left and follow traffic until we reach the edge of the city.”

Jack was overwhelmed. He was flying. It all had to be dream. He was still lying on the floor of his prison cell, and none of this was real.

So he approached it as a dream, and he flew. He flew free, jetting through traffic and banking through the air. He darted between the other flyers, and flipped a quick barrel roll.

“Calm down, Jack. You’re going to attract attention if you keep this up.”

“Sorry,” he said, and he slid back into traffic like a good little boy. After a few minutes of travel, he reached the city’s end and slid back out of traffic and into open skies. Out into freedom.

If this was a dream, Jack never wanted to wake up.

Chapter 43:

Rendezvous

The interrogator directed Jack eastward and the small flyer sped over dense rainforest. Trees beneath them started orange, then turned green after a few kilometers and finally thinned out at the foot of the Virunga Mountains.

“Set down in that clearing,” the interrogator said, and Jack did.

The flyer neared the ground and its stubby legs extended, then bent under the weight as the vehicle kissed the Earth. Just as Jack began to wonder how to remove himself from the cradle, the vehicle released him. He was back in the real world. Back in his own body. The experience was disorienting beyond belief.

The night was dark and rain had just begun to fall. The feeling of standing there beneath the clouds, splashed by rain and caressed by the warm winds, was simply brilliant. Jack’s skin was caked with months worth of filth, and he wanted nothing more than to stand in the rain and feel clean again. Feel new again.

“I should kill you,” Jack said after a long silence.

“You still have the option.”

He considered reaching for his gun, but he had too many questions that needed answers. The interrogator might have been suicidal, but he hadn’t worn out his usefulness. Not yet. “Will you tell me what’s going on?”

“Where should I begin?” the alien asked.

Jack’s shoulders were soaking wet, and the water trickled down over the rest of him. “Is Kai your real name, or was that just a cover?”

“Real name. When did you figure it out?”

“Not until you handed me the gun. You called me Jack. So, I gather you’re not Finnish, but... how do look so human?”

“Our shape is similar. For the rest, I altered my outward appearance. I created a disguise in order to gain your trust.”

“Helluva disguise,” Jack said. “I bought it hook, line and sinker.” He listened to the melodic pitter-patter on the leaves all around him. Just that morning, he was sure he’d never hear that sound again, yet there he was.

“That can’t be everything you want to know.”

“Of course not,” Jack said. He took a tentative step out of the flyer and onto the wet soil, fearing it would disappear the moment he touched it. When he was confident it was real and not going anywhere, he took another step and then sat down among the plants. “I want to know how this all happened. How did we end up here?”

Kai walked over to him, and Jack motioned for him to sit down. “It’s a long story,” Kai said.

“Take your time. I’m a patient man.”

Kai pulled his mask off and shoved it in his jacket, then took a deep breath. “As you wish. It starts thirty-two of your years ago. My people, the Somari, had just come out of a century long war, and for the first time in our history, our people were united. It was the dawn of a new age of prosperity, fueled by the technological advances made during the war.”

“What sort of advances?”

Kai smiled. “Genetic engineering. Biotechnology. The ability to manufacture new bodies from whole cloth, and transfer minds from one to the next.”

“So you’re...”

“Enhanced. A biotech construct. This is my third body, counting the one in which I was born.”

“Okay. Now we come to the part of the story where something terrible happens.”

“Yes. The Nefrem happened. Their battle fleet appeared in orbit one day and laid siege to our planet. Just like that, we were embroiled in war again. We thought we could defeat them, but their forces were too numerous. Too powerful. It took them only thirteen days to conquer our world, and our Archon chose to destroy it rather than concede defeat. He would not allow them to devour us.”

“Devour you?”

“That’s how the Nefrem operate. I’ll spare you the details.”

“Thanks. So... how did you survive?”

“I was placed in a bottle and set adrift on the sea of stars.”

“And you ended up where?”

“Other Sinits like me... infiltrators... they discovered which star systems the Nefrem were targeting, and the Archon’s dying wish was that I be sent to warn them.”

“And?”

“Five years later, my capsule arrived in the Oikeya system. The code be praised, Jack... You simply can’t imagine all the many strange wonders of that system. It was so rich and full of life. Three whole living worlds! Three, each with a completely unique ecosystem and collection of intelligent species. And that was only the beginning. Out among the asteroids were gargantuan membranous sacks full of water. Islands in space, each of them alive and intelligent, and full of yet more creatures. Life, free of the shackles of gravity. And all of it brought together, interconnected by living space ships that fly as naturally as a fish swims through water.”

“Sounds too good to be true.”

“I know. I thought the same thing every moment I was among them. I was sure I had died and gone to... heaven? The Oikeyans had no concept of war or hatred. No struggle or strife. They lived in peaceful harmony with one another, and they were all so very naive.” He was quiet for a long pause. “When I told them the destroyers were coming, they laughed. They actually laughed.”

“What’d you do?”

“Everything I could. I preached to whoever would listen, and trained whoever would learn. I traveled the system for eight years trying to build some kind of defense, until the Nefrem advance fleet finally arrived. The Oikeyans greeted them with open arms and paid dearly for the mistake. Millions died before my forces were able to turn the fleet away.”

“But they came back?”

“Of course. The destroyers returned in numbers that made a mockery of their assault on my homeworld, and they brought their living planet this time. The war was over before it ever began.”

“How many died?”

“Forty billion, Jack. Slaughtered, eaten and churned out into more Nefrem. The sixty million refugees here on Earth... they are all that remains.”

“But why come here, Kai? Why like this? You could’ve asked us for help.”

Kai looked him dead in the eyes. “Because you are Nefrem.”

“We look like them?”

“No, Jack. You are them, and there can be no mistake in this. You’re genetically identical. We only learned of this world from them. The location of your system was cleverly hidden in their databanks. It was heavily

encrypted and obscured behind falsified information, and I believed the secrecy was to prevent enemies from discovering the location of their homeworld.”

“So you brought the Oikeyans here to strike back.”

“Yes. We came prepared to wage the final battle. To tear out the weed at its root. The plan was to take the Nefrem by surprise and wipe out their civilization before they could mount a counter-offensive, and in that, we were fairly successful.”

“Except we’re not the Nefrem,” Jack said while shaking his head. “This doesn’t make any sense. We’ve always been here. We evolved here, and until you arrived, we were pretty sure there wasn’t life out there at all. I mean, we’ve only just taken our first baby steps out onto other planets, for Christ’s sake.”

“I know that now. In fact, your people survived precisely because you’re not the Nefrem. They live in hives the size of your largest cities. They have no farmland or suburbs. If you lived like that, you would have already been destroyed.”

“I’m so glad this has been a learning experience for you, Kai. Really. I mean that.”

“Sarcasm aside, the truth is that I can’t turn back time, and I can’t undo what I’ve done, but we still have a choice about who to become in the wake of this.”

“Yeah, I know the guy who said that.”

“I do too, and he’s an amazing creature. After everything that’s been done to him... everything he’s seen and been through, he still refuses to kill innocents. He could have destroyed the entire city in a flash of light, but he chose not to. I subjected him to more pain than any living thing could be expected to endure, and yet he spared my life.”

“He must be a God damned idiot.”

“Not at all. You’re a better man than even you realize, Jack Hernandez, and there’s something noble inside of you that I don’t understand. Something luminous that I couldn’t snuff out no matter how hard I tried. I will never cultivate a soul like yours, but I can become a weapon of your will, and perhaps atone for some of my mistakes.”

“And if I prefer you dead?”

“Then I’ll die. I deserve no less, and I know it... but I don’t think you’ll make that decision. You know that I can do more good alive than dead.”

“We’ll see,” Jack said. “No offense, but this all seems a little too convenient. You’ll excuse me if I don’t lead you straight back to the resistance.”

“I understand your apprehension, but I’ve no reason to deceive you. Your people have gotten sloppy in recent months. Your primary installations have already been located and dealt with, and all that remains are the fortified shelters... Arks, I believe you call them. The Oikeyans are mounting a final offensive as we speak, with the intent of finishing the fight once and for all. Humanity doesn’t have much time left.”

They both sat there and listened to the falling rain. Then a motion in the distance caught Jack’s eye, and he struggled to focus. Months of captivity had left his vision less sharp than it once was, and with some effort, he made out a rhino and two jackrabbits moving down the hillside. His first instinct was panic. “We’ve got company!” he shouted and scrambled up from the ground.

“Relax,” Kai said. “They’re friends.”

“What?”

“There are objectors among the Oikeyans that still believe life is sacred above all else. They want to end the war. When I informed them I was going to free you, these three volunteered to accompany us.”

Every muscle in Jack’s body was rigid and his heart was racing. Kai might have spent months torturing Jack, but at least he looked human. The exterminators were a different story. They still had a profound effect on him, and the sight alone sent adrenaline surging through his blood.

“Fuck me. Okay. I can handle this. Accompany us where exactly, Kai?”

“Up to you.”

“Figures,” Jack said. With that, he dropped back down and laid himself out in the ground cover. The rain fell harder every minute, and he was wet like a river. “For the time being, can I just lie here? I just want to lie here in the rain for a while.”

“If that’s what you wish. Should I... go somewhere else?”

Jack thought about it for a second and then said, “No. I may not like you, but you’re all I have. I’ve already had my share of solitude.”

“As you wish.”

Chapter 44:

Dead Sea

All told, fourteen months had passed since the beginning of the invasion, and Jack had spent four of them in captivity. Four months without sunshine. One hundred and eighteen days locked in a box, tortured and left to stew in his own despair while the world outside shambled on without him.

Now he was free. His flyer sliced through the air at more than two hundred kilometers an hour, racing northward over the vibrant green jungle.

Jack and the strange vehicle were intimately connected, but at the same time separate in a way that baffled him. The feeling of sheer, unbridled speed reminded him of riding a motorcycle, but taken to an unimaginable extreme, while the play between mount and master was more like riding a horse. Not that he'd ever ridden a horse, but he'd heard stories.

As they traveled, he was taken aback by how quickly nature had reclaimed her world. Jack had always heard that the Earth abides, but the swiftness of it disturbed him. The ashen cities were already grown over with fresh vegetation, and only the twisted metal spires hinted that anything had been there at all. Human civilization had been erased and forgotten. It left him feeling like civilization hadn't been an integral part of the world, but had rather existed in spite of it. Mankind had been bailing water from a leaky ship, and in the absence of his attention, the tides rose up and swept it all away.

Jack and his companions stopped every few hours so the flyer could rest and graze. It wasn't like the larger cuttlefish in this regard, which were self-sufficient and capable of space travel. This flyer was a commuter, and the city was its natural habitat. It was less than ideal outside of the city, and its reliance on external energy made it essentially useless after nightfall.

By the end of the first day, they reached the shores of the Red Sea where they camped for the night. Although Jack logically understood that the others could kill him at any time, the danger felt doubled once the sun went down. It bothered him so much that he hardly slept.

When morning came, they returned to the air and quickly crossed the sea, and Jack was once again in the Mideast. Another seven hours after that,

they arrived at the former site of Al Saif on the shores of the Dead Sea, and Jack confirmed what Kai had told him. Nothing remained of the base but a trash heap, the enemy having overrun the resistance more than a month before.

After an exhaustive search, Jack found himself wandering the ruins, and he paced for a long time while imagining how the battle went down, piecing together what he could from the debris. The airstrip had been torn to shreds, and various parts of the temporary buildings littered the ground, but he didn't see vehicle wreckage anywhere.

"Satisfied?" Kai asked.

"Not quite the right word, but yeah..."

He tried to reconcile what he remembered of the base's layout with the destruction all around him, in hopes of discovering a hidden weapons cache somewhere. It was a more difficult task than he might have guessed.

Kai had a frustrated look on his face. He was restless, but he held his tongue.

"I bet you're wondering what we're doing here," Jack said.

"The question crossed my mind."

"Trying to figure out if you're telling the truth about... well, anything. Seems you are."

"The world is full of surprises, no?"

Jack smiled in spite of himself. "Now, there's good news and bad news in this slag pile. The good news is that the resistance saw the attack coming, and evacuated before you all got here."

"How can you tell?"

"Trucks, planes. This place was rotten with 'em, but there's no sign of any here. The only explanation is that they got the hell out of dodge before the fireworks started."

"Where'd they get the information?"

"Ancient Chinese secret. I'll never tell."

"Fair answer. And the bad news?"

"Since they had time to pack up and leave, I'm betting they took most of their supplies with 'em. I was hoping to pick up a little extra firepower, but there's nothing but rubbish here."

Kai looked at him like he was absolutely mad. "Maybe I wasn't clear, Jack. There's a legion marching toward the Ark right now. Armor, siege

weapons and more than a million ground troops. We can't fight them on our own."

"I know," Jack said, "but I like to keep my options open. You can solve a lot of problems with a honking big pile of explosives."

Looking at the remains of Al Saif didn't exactly fill him with confidence. It looked like a hurricane had hit the base. An angry hurricane that was on fire, and full of lawnmower blades.

Off on the other side of the ruins, the rhino waved and shouted something. His deep voice carried a surprising distance over open ground. Kai cupped his hands to his mouth and shouted something back in a language Jack was beginning to recognize if not understand.

"What'd he say?"

"He asked if you were done moping around yet."

"And?"

"I told him you'd be done soon. Don't make a liar of me, Jack."

He wasn't sure whether to laugh or be angry at that. "We'll hit the road in a bit. Riddle me this though, Mr. Space Ninja... what the hell am I supposed to do?"

"If I knew that, I'd have done it already. Don't worry. You're a resourceful guy. You'll think of something."

Jack shook his head. "You either have too much faith, or a really strange sense of humor."

The alien picked up a piece of ruined metal and spun it around in his hand, trying to determine its original purpose. After a moment of fruitless head scratching, he cocked his arm back and threw it far into the distance.

It occurred to Jack that the hunk of metal must have weighed more than twenty kilos, yet Kai handled it like a baseball.

"They could have at least left me a bottle of hooch," Jack said after a while.

"Hooch?"

"Booze. Alcohol. Fermentation of fruit or grain, ingested to produce intoxication."

"You had me at alcohol."

"Ah."

Jack took one last look at the wreckage all around, shook his head and said, "That's enough. Let's get out of here." Then he turned and started off toward the flyer.

Kai followed. "Where to?"

"I want to see this alien legion. You know where they'll be?"

"Give or take. About two days ride at our current rate."

"Would they pay any attention to one of their own flyers buzzing them?"

"Probably not, as long as you don't act too suspicious."

"Good. I'm gonna prep the flyer. Go get the others."

"Will do," Kai said, and then he got a funny look on his face. "By the way... ummm... what's a ninja?"

Jack laughed. "They were assassins who excelled at sneaking into enemy castles and eliminating targets unseen. The movies got carried away, and portrayed them as unstoppable killing machines with mystical abilities. It's kind of silly."

"I learn something new every day," Kai said with a smile. Then he turned and ran off at a speed that'd make an Italian sports car blush. It took Jack the entire walk back to the flyer to convince himself what he saw was real, and not just some fanciful hallucination.

Chapter 45:

Millipede

Jack and his four alien companions traveled north, from the dusty beige of the Mideast to the green hills and roiling mountains of Eastern Turkey. Jack had never seen the Turkish landscape before, and the mountains there spiked out of the ground defiantly as if the Earth itself were invading the sky. The intensity of the steep mountains and gorges took his breath away, and he badly wanted to stop and explore.

There wasn't any time for that, though, and they flew on. Turkey gave way to green Georgia, followed by the Caucasus Mountains, a line of snow capped peaks which stood in a row like jagged teeth. On the other side, they found themselves in the remains of Russia, whose abandoned farmland stretched out in all directions like a patchwork quilt, so large that Jack thought he'd never see the end of it.

The colder climate and high altitudes slowed their progress, but they finally caught up with the Oikeyan legion after nearly three days of travel. The legion wasn't difficult to find, like a insanely large herd of buffalo lumbering across the land, stretching more than fifty kilometers from beginning to end. It was populated by strange creatures, some as large as container ships, and attended by swarms of flyers darting from one part of the pack to the next, like flocks of birds before a storm. The multitude of stomping feet kicked up a dust cloud that billowed out toward the horizon and covered the ground in a dense and impenetrable haze.

Jack, joined to the flyer he named Felix, approached the herd cautiously from behind, nipping at their heels. "Holy crap," his disembodied voice said once he was close enough to really appreciate the scale of it.

A rumble filled the air like endless thunder.

"You see," Kai said, "we can't fight this. Even the Nefrem would have trouble standing before this kind of force."

Jack and Felix surged forward, weaving into and through the formation. He flew up alongside one of the great grey walkers, and marveled at the locomotive-sized cannon mounted atop it. He imagined a weapon that big could crack a mountain in two.

"We could talk to them, maybe convince them to stop."

“Come on, Jack... do they look like they’re in a talking mood?” Kai shouted over the roar.

“There’s gotta be someone in charge who could put a stop to this. Some leadership.”

“There is,” Kai said, “The ones you call pilots are in control. The Alarhya. But they won’t listen to anyone anymore.”

“What changed?”

“Your tactics. Your kind left Yuon Kwon mangled and broken in the field, and that infuriated the Alarhya. They consider the vehicles sacred. When the suicide bombings began, it was the final straw.”

“Suicide bombings! What suicide bombings?”

“It started after your capture. Generators were too difficult to reach, so the terrorists went after population centers. Markets, parks and the like. I don’t blame your people, but you see how these things escalate?”

Jack peeled away from the walker and continued on through the herd, sliding between a pair of smaller creatures and then under the long legs of another massive walking cannon. His skills in darting through traffic had been honed to a razor’s edge through years of navigating highway 101 at rush hour, and the comparatively sparse and evenly spaced vehicles in the Oikeyan herd posed little challenge.

The legion inspired awe and terror in the same breath, and for the life of him, Jack couldn’t imagine anything he could do about it. He was watching an avalanche roll down a mountain in slow motion.

He couldn’t stop the avalanche, but there was still a chance to warn the village in its path. They couldn’t fight it, but they might be able to get out of the way. Where could a couple hundred million refugees go, though? Where could they hide that the legion wouldn’t hunt them down and slaughter them?

Jack’s disembodied voice asked, “Do you know their game plan?”

“They’re still using my organization and tactics. Did you see the long-necked Yuon Kwon at the back of the pack?”

“With lots of legs?”

“Those are the ones. Constructors. They’ll build fortresses and gun emplacements in a wide circle around the Ark to isolate it. Then the siege cannons move into place and beat the enemy into dust. Power comes from a young city Yuon Kwon that will hang back away from the fight.”

“I don’t see it.”

“He won’t come until the battle lines are secured.”

Kai’s description generally agreed with what Jack had seen at Al Saif. There were deep indentations in the ground where the temporary fortifications had sat, and Al Saif itself looked to have been blasted from multiple directions at once.

Jack and Felix continued on through the pack, studying all the many new types of Yuon Kwon he’d never seen before. There were walkers in all shapes and sizes, covered in weapons both familiar and not. The vast majority of flyers were the cuttlefish type Jack had often seen since the invasion began, but there were also groups of heavier flyers weighted down with payloads of seed-shaped bombs.

Jack felt a strange kinship with the Yuon Kwon all around him, and he started to wonder what the long term effects of piloting Felix might be.

“So the young city... that’s the legion’s weak spot?”

“If it has a weak spot, then yes. The city is the lynch-pin of whole organization, but don’t think it’s defenseless. It’ll be bristling with weaponry and have a large population of Sey Chen covering it in defensive membranes.”

“Sey Chen?”

“You call them monks. They have peculiar abilities.”

“And the defensive membranes? You mean like force fields or something?”

“What’s a force field?”

“Never mind.”

The two jackrabbits said something in the common language, quickly and tensely. Whatever they were talking about was worrying them.

“Ferash and Niko said we’re picking up unwanted attention. If you’ve seen what you need to see, we should leave, Jack.”

Jack hadn’t seen what he wanted. He was hoping for the impossible; a weak underbelly that he could stab at to stop the attack before it started. He’d learned as much as he could, though, and he allowed himself to drift to the back of the pack. When he’d fallen sufficiently behind the Oikeyan legion, he pulled away and headed for the hills to rest and think about his next move.

Whatever that would be.

Chapter 46:

Homecoming

Farmland gave way to the wide Russian steppe as Jack and his alien companions headed toward the Ark. The nearly flat land went on and on, covered in short tufts of grass and little else. It was the most boring country Jack had ever laid eyes on, and he'd seen some pretty boring places in his time. This one took the boring cake and ate it with a boring glass of milk.

Worse yet, the sparse grass of the steppe made it more difficult to keep Felix well fed, and the small flyer couldn't maintain top speed for as long as he could in sunnier, more abundant regions. Progress slowed to a crawl across that flat, uneventful countryside, and the only bright side was that the Oikeyan legion would undoubtedly be slowed as well.

The travelers camped under the stars and ate reheated alien field rations twice a day. The food was a version of the same multi-colored stuff Jack had eaten in prison, but more energy dense and flavorful. It was bitter and nearly unpalatable. While it provided all the nutrients he needed, his stomach constantly felt empty, and from the sour look on the rhino's face, he felt the same way.

As they traveled, Kai took it upon himself to teach Jack the Oikeyan common language called Mirresh, which was used for interspecies communication. As Kai described it, every race had their own variety of ethnic groups, each with its own languages and dialects, but all Oikeyans knew Mirresh, and their public discourse and law were exclusively conducted in it.

Much to Jack's surprise, it was easy to pick up. So easy that he was speaking Mirresh with a limited vocabulary within the first week. Prior to that, he'd believed himself incapable of learning a second language, let alone one from beyond the stars.

Once they could communicate, Jack got to know the three other aliens, despite his instincts otherwise. The rhino's name was Dojer, and his race called themselves Rozom. He belonged to the worker caste, which entailed having a long-legged bug bonded to his blowhole as a child. It caused him to grow larger and stronger than the rest of his kind, and develop a hard, silicate armor. Surprisingly, the bug was also intelligent, but his species,

known as Marakhya, were shy and preferred to let their Rozom do all the talking. Jack couldn't even begin to pronounce the Marakhya's name, and was glad it wasn't too friendly.

Dojer however proved to be very talkative after a short warm-up. The hulking creature was full of stories that all ended with puzzling punch-lines and him belly laughing, but which left Jack confused. Rozom humor just wasn't Jack's cup of tea.

The two jackrabbits were a mated pair named Ferash and Niko, and their species called themselves Kitsu. If these two were any indication, the Kitsu were a playful and almost childlike race with boundless curiosity and a keen interest in machines. They hounded Jack for just a peek at his guns and other gadgets, and when he finally caved in, the pair took turns taking everything apart and putting it back together again. This would have infuriated him, but they did a better job cleaning and maintaining his gear than he ever had.

Jack got the impression that Ferash, the male of the pair, was a dreamer and maybe even an artist of some kind before he became a soldier. He often went off alone to stare at the horizon in deep thought. Niko, his mate, let him be during those stretches and instead spent the time avidly listening to Dojer's weird stories.

Both Ferash and Niko yearned to raise children, but thought it a mistake to bring new lives into such a troubled world.

Much to Jack's surprise and dismay, the Kitsu were affectionate. Their extended families shared close living quarters and often slept in communal rooms, which Jack discovered one morning when he awoke to find both Ferash and Niko cuddled up against him. He shooed them away the first few times but it became more effort than it was worth. Besides, they were warm.

At least Dojer didn't want to cuddle. Jack didn't think he could cope with that. Or survive it.

They reached the Ark after nearly three straight weeks of travel. Dojer, Ferash and Niko stayed with Felix, hidden in one of the few nearby copses, while Jack and Kai approached on foot. Soon, they were in the vast, sprawling village that had sprung up around the underground shelter. The place filled Jack with both hope and despair. It provided a clear example of what the human race had been reduced to, as well as their ability to plod on in the face of abject adversity.

The buildings were makeshift and sloppy. Impromptu dirt roads wandered everywhere, lined with firepits, all kinds of livestock, and dirt faced refugees bundled up in whatever clothes they could find. Jack felt like he was walking through a high-school reproduction of medieval times, where the students wore costumes made out of old hand-me-downs. It was mass poverty on a scale he'd never seen before, clothed in the waste of recent prosperity.

The great artificial mound that was the Ark dominated the sky beyond the village, like a crashing tsunami frozen in place. Large metal hatches covered its surface, looking like pressure release valves or connectors for impossibly large hoses.

"Great. My people are living in an ant hill," Jack said as they marched.

"What's an ant?"

"Small insects that live in large underground hives. Known for ruining picnics."

"Perhaps humans and Nefrem have more in common than we thought."

"Perhaps," Jack said, and they continued on.

It took the better part of the day to reach the Ark's southern entrance, a concrete tunnel at ground level set in the side of the mound. Large enough for three commuter trains to fit through side-by-side, it was guarded by a handful of soldiers in unmatched uniforms, and no traffic went in or out.

As they approached, one of the soldiers stepped out to meet them. His uniform was a dark green woodland camouflage, with a pattern common among Slavic countries. He said something in one of the many languages Jack didn't understand.

"English?" Jack said. "Anglistina?"

The soldier turned to his mates and spat out a mouthful of words. Another of the soldiers sauntered over and said, "Only military personnel is allowed in Ark right now. We apologize for inconvenience."

"Yeah, that's great," Jack replied. "I'm with the resistance out of Al Saif. Tell Colonel Galili that Jack Hernandez is here with information about the enemy. He'll want to see me."

The soldiers shared a couple words, and the one who didn't speak any English jogged back to the guard post and picked up an old-style wired telephone. The handset was shaped like a barbell, and Jack had only seen models of its like in classic movies and period pieces. He almost laughed.

The soldier chattered then waited, then chattered again and waited some more. After twenty minutes of this, he returned, gave the English speaking soldier some instructions and finally returned to his post.

“He says to take you inside. Welcome to the Ark.”

Without another word, he turned and walked down the tunnel. Jack and Kai followed, and after fifty meters, they were in a whole new world.

The inside of the Ark was oddly warm, and after its cavernous loading dock, not-so-oddly cramped. Tunnels meandered off in every direction, marked by multi-colored stripes on the walls that lead to different sections and departments.

The soldier led them down a tunnel to an elevator which carried them up several levels, then through another tunnel only to ride a second elevator down a few levels, and finally through one last tunnel until it opened into a huge staging area. Mobs of soldiers moved and inventoried stacks of steel cargo containers while more soldiers in the distance performed tasks Jack couldn't make out.

The Slavic soldier told Jack and Kai to wait near the entrance, then turned and disappeared the way he came.

“It's safe to say something's going on here,” Kai said as he looked around.

“Something big,” Jack agreed.

They stood there doing nothing for ten minutes, and then someone called Jack's name. The wolfish Colonel Galili came marching across the crowded floor with a look of utter disbelief on his face. “It's really you under that beard?”

“Not a lot of razors in alien prisons.”

Galili walked right up to Jack, grabbed both of his shoulders and shook him a bit as if to test that he was real. “I thought the guards were pulling a joke on me, but no... Here you are, Mr. Hernandez. There truly isn't anything in this universe that can kill you orange jumpsuits.”

“Nothing yet,” Jack said, wondering how many times he'd heard that same exchange. “Listen Colonel, I'd love to catch up, but I've got some pressing news. There's a big damn force stomping this way, and we need to evacuate.”

“We already know, and... let's just say that preparations are under way.” The colonel's tone hinted at something he wasn't prepared to share.

“I don’t think you understand, sir. I’m talking about the kind of attack that nothing could survive. Enough firepower to level mountains.”

“We have the matter well in hand, and that’s all I can say for the time being. You’ll just have to trust me, Jack. Come, walk with me. I have a thousand questions. Your friend... he’s trustworthy?”

The three started walking past the crates. Jack wasn’t completely sure how to answer the colonel’s question. Trust was a slippery issue. “Yeah,” he said after a spell, “he’s the one that broke me out. Colonel Galili, this is Kai... Makinen.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Makinen. That’s a very interesting uniform.”

“Finnish covert ops,” Kai said. “Very covert.”

“Very covert indeed, to have slipped in and retrieved our man here without a scratch.” The colonel had a look in his eyes like he’d just been shortchanged at the market. “I can’t thank you enough,” he said.

Kai ducked his head and said, “It was the least I could do, sir.” There was a strange look in his eyes as well, but Jack couldn’t quite put a finger on it.

“Now then, Mr. Hernandez... the higher ups will want to debrief you in full, but I was hoping you could fill in some details for me first. There were parts of your team’s report that could use a little clarification.”

Jack had a sneaking suspicion lurking around his head, but he jammed it down and instructed it to shut its mouth. “However I can help, Colonel.”

“When you were in the generator room, how did the enemy detect your presence?”

“I’m not sure. One moment we were standing there, and then the situation went all pear shaped. Red lights and sirens all over the city.”

“Why not plant the explosives then? It would’ve taken another thirty seconds at most.”

Jack’s people had left things out, and he had no way of knowing what story they’d concocted. He was in a very sticky position all of a sudden, and he decided to tie his hitch to the truth. “I don’t know what you’ve been told, Colonel, but I had already decided to abort the mission before the alarm was sounded.”

“As I feared,” the colonel said, his voice heavy with disappointment. “Do you understand how far back you set us? That bombing could have turned the entire war around.”

“-I’ve got a bad feeling about this,-” Kai said in Mirresh.

“But you weren’t strong enough to do what needed to be done. After what those bastards did to our world, you didn’t have the intestinal fortitude to finish the job. You turned your back on your own species. Crippled our ability to strike at them.”

“Jack...”

“And now you come here and tell me to run? To turn tail and flee like a coward? How dare you!”

“There were women and children. Innocents, Colonel. They are people just like us, and I won’t have that kind of carnage on my head.”

The colonel moved with such speed that Jack hardly saw it coming. The fist connected with his jaw, rocking his head, and he stumbled back and fell to the concrete floor. He climbed back to his feet with the metallic tang of blood in his mouth, and said “We have to find some kind of peace, Colonel. The future depends on it.”

“You idiot. They aren’t people. They are godless monsters. A blight on the universe, and I won’t rest until I see every last one of them killed. Cowards like you made our world an easy target, and I won’t allow you to sacrifice the last of us just to satisfy your idiot ideals.”

It was around then Jack realized he was surrounded. Armed soldiers had moved in and closed a circle around him, leaving no avenue of escape.

“You’re a traitor, Jack. Not just to our cause or our people, but to the whole world. I trusted you. I believed in you, and you threw it away. For what? For them? That’s not good enough. Go rot in a cell until I’m ready to choke you to death.”

Rough hands grabbed his arms and pinned them behind his back. Someone kicked the back of his legs and he fell to his knees.

Kai already had his hands behind his head. “-I can kill them all,-” he said, still speaking in the alien language.

“-Escape, but kill no one,-” Jack replied, more or less.

“-What about you?-”

“This is how it has to be,” he replied in English.

A guard reached out to grab Kai and the alien reacted, his movements fast and fluid like a dancing flame. He grabbed the arm, twisted it and threw the guard into the others. With his other hand, he pulled his mask from inside his jacket and slid it over his face, then disappeared.

Not precisely. It was more like someone painted the world on the skin of his uniform, a Wile E. Coyote version of a cloaking device that was

never-the-less effective.

“What in hell?” the colonel shouted. “Open fire!”

Before anyone could let loose a single round, Kai leapt high into the air, sprang off the ceiling and was gone.

“Lock down the Ark. No one enters or leaves until I have that fucker’s head on a stake!”

Jack spat blood onto the floor. “You’ll never catch him.”

“We’ll see about that,” Colonel Galili said. He drew his handgun and pistol-whipped Jack, returning him to the sweet darkness where there was no war at all.

Chapter 47:

Hoosegow

All things considered, Jack didn't mind prison so much this time. Maybe it was the human-prepared food, which he hadn't had the pleasure of in five months. Maybe it was because there were other prisoners in shouting distance, or moaning distance in many of their cases. Maybe it was the simple fact that he wasn't pinned to the ceiling like a defective light fixture, nor was he being tortured for information he didn't have. Maybe he'd simply grown fond of enclosed spaces.

Regardless of the reason, Jack considered his situation just peachy, and he resigned himself to sit back and wait for the Ark to be annihilated. His only wish was for a chance to see it all burn down before Galili choked the life out of him.

There was a commotion at the end of the cell block, and two people in hooded ponchos came rushing down the aisle. "Which cell?" one of them asked.

"Sixty-seven," the other said hurriedly.

Their pounding feet echoed through the empty halls, and they came to a screeching halt in front of Jack's cell. "Is that him?"

"I dunno... There's an awful lot of beard in the way."

"Is this a jail break or improv night at the Chuckle Hut?" Jack asked.

Charlie lowered his hood, and then the five-foot hoodlum beside him lowered hers as well, revealing Lisa Albright's glittering smile.

Charlie spoke while he attached a small explosive to the cell door. "Good to see you, bro. I thought for sure you were a goner."

"I didn't," Lisa said matter-of-factly, and added, "You're gonna want to get down." She and Charlie both ducked to the side.

Jack ignored her, and blithely sat on his small bunk with his hands behind his head. The charge blew the lock seconds later, the blast pinpoint specific, producing little more than a few stray sparks and a puff of smoke.

Charlie pulled the gate and it rumbled across the floor, while Lisa stood in the opening, waving for Jack to follow. "Come on, hero. Time's a-wastin'."

He pushed himself up, stepped into the opening, took Lisa in his arms and kissed her hard. When he pulled away, she had a sour sort of smile on her face. "You could use some mouth wash," she said.

"Sorry," he said. "Been in prison. Second in so many months. Oral hygiene hasn't been a priority."

"Regardless," she said, nuzzling against his chest for a moment, "I'm glad to see you, too."

"Come on, love birds," Charlie chided. "We need to get a move on before someone notices you're missing."

"Like I've never done this before," Jack said, and the three took off at a swift pace.

Charlie knew the inside of the rat maze like the back of his hand, and he led the way. He ducked in and out of shady corners and paused before every guard station, until they were clear of the detention district altogether. Then they threw caution to the wind and ran at break-neck pace all the way back to the loading docks. Nikitin and Chase were waiting there in a four-wheeler with the engine running.

"I'll be damned," Nikitin said. "I will most surely be damned."

Chase revved the engine and said, "Yer a sight for sore eyes, boss."

Jack smiled. He'd been sure he would never see those faces again, yet there they all were. They were more than friends; after all they'd been through together, they were his family. Even Charlie.

The three jumped into the jeep, and Chase hit the gas. The wheels squealed, the vehicle lurched forward and it flew through the tunnel leading outside. To Jack's shock and dismay, the armored doors were gaping wide open. "The man I was with, did they capture him?"

"Nope," Charlie said. "He made it out before they even got the doors closed, and they canceled the lockdown. Must be real fast, that one... left two dozen dislocated shoulders behind him."

"Fast isn't even the half of it," Jack said, but his words were lost in the wind. The jeep raced out of the Ark and into the open night air, then slowed and trundled along the lightless roads.

"So, where to?" Chase asked after a half-klick.

"South," was all Jack said, and Chase took them Southward until the village thinned and disappeared behind them. After another half-hour across the open steppe, the copse where Jack left Felix and the others came into view.

Jack tapped Chase on the shoulder and said, "Slow down when we get near that group of trees. Listen... I know you folks have heard some rumors about me turning traitor, and throwing my hat in with the aliens."

"No worries," Charlie said. "We wouldn't have busted you out if we believed a word of it, bro."

Nikitin said, "You've saved my ass enough times to earn a little blind trust."

"Yeah, about that..." Jack said and paused to look for the right words. "I need to cash that trust in. I didn't exactly come back alone."

"We gathered as much." Charlie gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Managed to spring a couple other prisoners on your way out?"

"No. I came back with the jailer and three of his ET buddies."

A silence fell over the passengers, so brittle that Jack thought it might shatter.

"Your partner. The guy that made it out of the Ark?" Nikitin asked.

"Yeah. That's him."

Jack could smell the confusion.

"So... there are humans working with the aliens?" Charlie asked.

"No, he just looks like us. It's a disguise."

Nikitin was the first to speak. "Hey pal... I don't think I'm alone in saying that you're actually shaking my faith a little bit here."

"I know, but I promise I'm no traitor. I'm trying to..."

"To stop the war," Lisa said. "What else? You're the same man you've always been. Still standing up for what we all used to believe in. Still trying to save lives, no matter the cost."

"Any which way I can."

"You're a real stubborn son of a bitch," Charlie said. "You always took after dad, that way."

"It's the only virtue I've got. That's a virtue, right?"

Lisa shook her head. "Not one of the classical ones, no."

"Bottom line is that a big ass stampede is about to storm through here and trample this place into dust, and millions are going to die unless we do something about it."

"What kind of something?" Charlie asked.

Nikitin twisted in his seat and looked Jack in the eyes. "Does your plan involve doing something dangerous or stupid?"

"I'm not sure yet, but probably both."

Nikitin laughed. "Right on. Count me in."

"Why not," Charlie said, "I don't much like the colonel's battle plan anyway, and I've never been too attached to breathing."

"You know what he's up to?" Jack asked.

"Mostly. There's something super secret brewing that I couldn't get in on, but I know the major moves. I've also heard rumors that they jury-rigged the nuclear reactor into some kind of last resort weapon, in case things go real bad. Command has a real no surrender mentality, and frankly, these aren't my kind of tactics."

"Me neither. You in, Chase?"

"You know me, boss. I don't ask too many questions. Just point me in a direction and I'll drive."

"What about you, Lisa? With me?"

"You need to ask? To the ends of the Earth and right on into hell."

The jeep slowed and pulled around the circle of trees. Jack took a deep breath and said, "Then it's settled. Do me a favor and keep cool when you meet my new friends. They may be monsters, but they're pretty decent folk."

Chapter 48:

Salamander

The day of the attack arrived, and Elkellian was mounted up and ready to go. He felt nervous, as did his Yuon Kwon, Klethis Aum-Auresh. They were eager to get things started, hoping the sprint would calm their nerves. The waiting was always the hardest part.

Rider and mount strutted and paced together, while the Silgama—the many-legged constructor Yuon Kwon—assembled fortifications all around them. Elkellian tried to calm Klethis, whispering, “Soon, honorable one. Just another few moments, and then it will be our time.”

The other Yuon Kwon and their Alarhya stood at ease, and Elkellian wondered how they did it. He was always a bundle of nervous energy before a battle, and he worried that it was just his nerves and not Klethis at all. It was sometimes hard to tell which was which, even for a practiced rider.

He had reason to be nervous, though. This would be the last great battle. Broken remnants of the Nefrem were still scattered around the planet, but the great bulk of their military was here, and they would fall. There could be no other outcome. Elkellian cherished the thought of a day when the Nefrem were nothing but a legend, a scary story whispered to children over firelight, and the Oikeyans’ new home was truly their own once and for all.

Then the war horns sounded and it was time. Elkellian and Klethis whooped together, their combined voices rising above the din of Yuon Kwon hooves. “For freedom!” they cried, their long legs launching them out over the open ground, and the advance had begun.

Neck and neck, the rush of Yuon Kwon raced out across the plains toward the Nefrem fortress. Elkellian and Klethis became pure speed, each stride driving them faster until the world around became a blur and only their distant target was clear.

Open soil gave way to the enemy’s primitive huts, and the pair cut hard to the left. Klethis’ agile hooves found footing between the close packed shelters, while Elkellian scanned the clutter for his target.

There it was.

Klethis' hooves clattered, his legs bent and filled with energy, then he leapt high into the air. He was pressed against the sky. The world was eerily quiet at the top of the arc until the wind rushed in to fill it.

Rider and mount cried out in unison, and spread their cannon arms like short, stubby wings. They sailed down toward the Nefrem air-defense tower and fired, bright blue blasts streaking out and battering the target into a cloud of smoke and burning debris.

The tower was no more. Elkellian and Klethis plummeted through the cloud, reoriented in mid-air, and cranked hard to the side. As they hit the ground, they rebounded and raced off in a new direction, already on the hunt for the next tower.

The sky was clear except for a single cloud. Zelliar and Vissa Aum-Heirath climbed high into the air, twisting and spinning as they went, the rest of their fighter wing trailing behind in a delta formation. The rider and his flyer cut thrust and allowed their momentum to carry them up into stall. The Yuon Kwon's nose just barely touched the misty cloud, then together they tumbled back toward the swollen Earth.

Clouds were good omens, and since there was only one, Zelliar gave it a gentle kiss before rushing into battle. The fin surrounding Vissa's hull spun into motion, and her thrust returned. Mount and rider howled as they bolted down from the heavens and opened fire on the ramshackle settlement below.

The timing was exact. The Auresh walkers sprinted clear, having destroyed the air defense towers and paved the way for the Heirath flyers to finish the job. Zelliar's fighter wing stretched apart and spat blue flames at the sprawling wooden city, which lit up like kindling and choked the air with smoke. They turned the Nefrem settlement into a raging firestorm, a twisting, demonic inferno crackling beneath a sky of charcoal grey.

Flames reached upward, with only the dirt mound that was the Nefrem fortress standing above them, uncaring and unaffected at the center of the blaze. Zelliar had an odd feeling looking upon the fortress, as if it were moulting, shedding its skin and transforming into something else. Something unknown and terrible.

No matter. He could hardly wait to see it smashed to pieces, and he wouldn't have long to wait. He called out to the rest of the fighter wing, who returned to formation and left the battlefield as one.

Ten-thousand Heirath Yuon Kwon filled the darkening skies as they formed up and raced away from the burning lands. At the battle line beneath them, a Kitsu named Arcotis sat atop one of the many Khoom Yuon Kwon, the massive siege-cannons which sat aimed at the fortress. The Khoom could fire incredible distances, but their vision was terrible, making the Kitsu and their sharp eyes ideal companions.

When the last of the Heirath were clear, Arcotis gave the signal. The great walker leaned forward, braced itself and fired its unbelievably large cannon with a deafening thump. The other Khoom and their Kitsu fired all around the great circle of the Oikeyan battle line, creating a thunderous cacophony. Their rounds exploded in star-shaped bursts on the other side of the inferno, biting deep craters out of the armored mound.

The rhythmic thump of the cannons continued throughout the day while the crackling firestorm raged, yet the Nefrem fortress remained. Arcotis called out adjustments, placing shells all over his target, but the building stood despite him, pitted and chewed up yet unassailable and imperious above the flames.

Twilight came, and the charcoal sky turned black. The fires burnt on, unquenchable and undying, lighting the landscape in flickering yellow and orange, but still the fortress stood.

Arcotis called out another adjustment and shouted "Fire!" above the racket. He watched yet another blast take an insignificant hunk out of the fortress, grimacing with the realization that cracking it might take all night.

Daniel waited in a dark, stuffy, cramped room. There were other men at either shoulder, in front of and behind him, and he felt like a sardine. Or maybe a canned mackerel. Or anchovy. Definitely a fish of some sort.

They'd been standing there in the dark throughout the day, while the thunder of nearby artillery rocked the shelter over and over again. It didn't seem so bad at first, but after more than eight hours of standing nuts-to-butts, Daniel was uncomfortable in a way he never thought possible.

Then a red light flicked on to signal the assault, and Daniel and the others checked their weapons one last time.

"Locked and loaded," a sergeant yelled.

"Ready to rock and roll!" the others replied.

Ground charges went off. The Earth rumbled and shook as thousand upon thousands of buried explosives detonated for tens of kilometers around, tearing the ground asunder and disrupting the enemy line. Alien screams and panicked cries rose above the din, as the constant thump of artillery finally came to an end.

The release hatch opened with a groan, revealing the dim and smoky night, the riven landscape and raging fires beyond. Gun emplacements on either side of the hatch opened fire, spitting burning lead at the alien bastards, their bright tracers streaking the dark sky above.

“Go, go, go!” Daniel shouted, accompanied by the sound of boots pounding dirt.

All along the battle line, a flash flood of fresh human troops numbering in the millions surged from their underground shelters, filling the ragged craters left by their explosives. The teams took turns moving, odds then evens, providing cover fire while their counterparts advanced, then striving for a few more meters. They squeezed the enemy in towards the Ark and the ravenous blaze which surrounded it.

Daniel’s squad pushed fast and hard, and as a group, dove to their bellies and opened fire. Their barking rifles punched holes in the invaders, who scrambled for cover in half-demolished forts. The twitching corpses of the giant cannon walkers lay beyond, their legs shattered by the surprise attack.

“Move up the MG!” Daniel shouted, and a gunner stomped up behind him, hit the deck and leaned into his weapon. The gun spat another stream of hot lead into the enemy hordes.

Grenades arced high, rolled across the ground and exploded, raining shrapnel in every direction. Rockets whistled by, their smoke trails gleaming in the orange light of the thriving inferno.

“We got ‘em. Keep up the pressure!”

“Right flank. Pin it down.”

“Die bastards!”

Daniel was sighting targets and dropping one alien after the next when he heard a sound like no other. He heard and felt it, like the buzz of a defective speaker at a concert, but amplified a thousand times. He looked all over for the source of the noise, and finally found a titanic silhouette in the smoke filled sky.

An instant later, metallic bubbles like boiling quicksilver appeared around the alien troops. Bullets and rockets alike bounced off the bubbles impotently, unable to penetrate or even disturb them, while the enemy regrouped inside.

Just like that, the advantage went back to the invaders, while the human soldiers sought cover and dug in. A new battle line emerged, with forces entrenched on either side, lobbing explosives forward and firing at anything stupid enough to raise its head. It ceased to be a battle, and instead became a meat grinder, churning human and alien alike into an undifferentiated smear of stinking offal.

Suppressed by fire and locked in place, the soldiers on both sides fought without rest. The lines never moved more than a meter in either direction, and the carnage continued until morning.

Chapter 49:

Donovan's Counter-Attack

Legacy's bridge was oddly quiet. The three tiered ivory-white room had been redecorated, now sporting a combination of human and Eireki technology, as did much of the rest of the ship. Dozens of computer workstations lined the room, each manned by a crew member busily making final preparations for the return.

Marcus Donovan was floating in place at the command station, the exact spot where he was bonded to Legacy more than a year before. He'd become so adept at manipulating the gravity systems that his feet never touched the floor anymore. He was content instead to fly from one position to the next, like a proper creature of the void.

"This is taking too damn long," he said. "Mason, give me some good news."

"Loading procedures are nearly complete, sir. We're waiting on the last cargo shipment right now."

Much to Marcus' surprise, things had gone largely according to plan during the previous nine months. The two factories, one inside Legacy and the other on the surface of Mars, had worked non-stop, fed by materials reclaimed from the two small moons. The fleet of tugs completely dismantled Deimos, and Phobos was nearly hollow now.

The three habitation domes of Ares Colony were transformed into a sprawling metropolis that far outpaced its population, while a half-dozen destroyers and an assortment of smaller warships joined Legacy in orbit. They also surrounded Mars with a network of defense satellites, capable of putting a serious hurt on anyone reckless enough to arrive unannounced.

Mason said, "The last carrier is docked, sir. We're ready to go."

Marcus nodded. "About time. Open a priority channel to Administrator Saladin."

Mason tapped at his console, and a holographic image of the administrator appeared at the front of the bridge.

"You're ready to depart, Dr. Donovan?"

"As ready as we'll ever be. Does my fleet meet with your approval, Administrator?"

“Of course,” Saladin said. “And we both know I couldn’t stop you anyway. Take care of my people, Marcus.”

“I’ll bring them back to you, sir.”

“Good luck and God speed.”

The administrator ducked his head and the hologram vanished. An instant later, the walls of the bridge went into crystal mode, revealing the endless sea of stars and a particularly bird-like cruiser doing barrel rolls in space.

“Should I inform Phoenix we’re ready to get under way?” Mason asked.

“No,” Marcus said with a grin. “Faulkland’s a big boy. He’ll figure it out.”

He told Legacy it was time, and she did the rest. The starscape lurched out of position as the ship came about, then she launched toward Earth, accompanied by the feeling falling.

Sarah Park checked her instruments and reported, “Reading zero obstructions between here and our destination. Hollow-drive at ninety percent output. Linear gravitational accelerators running at maximum efficiency. Current speed is .108 C, Earth relative. ETA in forty-three minutes.”

“Good,” Marcus said, but he didn’t mean it. Forty-three minutes was too long. A minute would be too long, but Legacy was still running on a single hollow-drive, which limited her to less than a fifth of her maximum speed and prevented the use of her instantaneous traversal system altogether. That also meant they were confined to a single star-system until they could somehow crack the hollow-drive’s secrets.

With only one drive, the ship was always riding on the razor’s edge of failure. Legacy was a mind-bogglingly powerful ship, but she was crippled compared to her former glory. And worse, overdrawing could destroy the one remaining drive, and Legacy would simply die.

Without access to new hollow-drives, she also couldn’t construct sentient vessels like herself. The fleet was instead composed of hybrid vessels, which bent Eireki technology to human designs. They were human ships with alien aftermarket parts.

Rao had made some headway in his study of hollow-drive technology, but it was slow going. He theorized that the device used a gravitational lens to distort the fabric of space, warping probability and producing a fountain of exotic particles at its center. It basically generated a near-infinite supply

of energy out of thin air. Or maybe it sucked power out of another dimension, or out of magical pixy farts for all he knew.

That power came at the price of durability. The slightest crack in the hollow-drive's casing would cause it to self-destruct and collapse in on itself, rendering it permanently useless. There was no repairing it or salvaging its remains. There was no way to take it apart and study its insides. A hollow-drive was either whole and functioning, or destroyed beyond all recognition.

They were designed that way to prevent the Nefrem from replicating the technology, but it had drawbacks the designers hadn't foreseen.

The forty-three minute trip passed in tense silence, and then the bright blue Earth appeared and filled the bridge crew's view. The Phoenix had already arrived ahead of them.

Legacy briefly flashed a memory through Marcus' head of the Earth—Garden, as she still called it—eons ago when she first arrived. The planet's beauty hadn't dimmed at all with age, and it was a precious, shining gem among a cold and distant universe.

The silence was filled with prayers. The crew were in the presence of something divine, something that still had the power to take their breath away and inspire their imaginations. In a few moments, they were going to stain it with blood.

Marcus floated higher into the air, took a deep breath and spoke. As he did, his voice echoed through every inch of Legacy, as well as the many smaller ships contained within her. "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome home."

The glowing Earth filled his eyes. "We stand on a precipice; victory is finally within our grasp, yet the possibility of failure still haunts us. Let this be a moment of quiet reflection before the storm. We look into our hearts for the strength to steel our resolve, and make our will unassailable. Our fury unstoppable. In just a few minutes, we will descend through the heavens and bring fire down upon the enemy. We will crush him where he stands and strike a blow for freedom, and through this conflict forge a new destiny from our blood, sweat and tears. Here above the clouds, I can finally see one thing clearly, and you should see it too. We are the future, a new humanity, and the time has come for us to take back our world. So I ask you, are you ready?"

The rally cry of fifteen-hundred eager soldiers echoed back, and Marcus smiled.

“Mason, transmit on all known frequencies.”

“Ready, sir.”

“Attention alien invaders. This is Marcus Donovan, commander of the Eireki starship Legacy. Make peace with your gods. End transmission.”

“Channel closed, sir.”

The rapid assault carriers emerged from the hangar bay and descended toward the planet with Faulkland’s Phoenix trailing behind.

Legacy spun, took aim and spat out the five Hoplite troop transports, which streaked out and became shooting stars as they touched the upper atmosphere.

The dice were cast. There was nothing left but to watch, wait and pray.

Hoplite Alpha tore through the stratosphere at several times the speed of sound. The hexagonal pod glowed white-hot, but the chamber inside was comfortable and quiet. A hundred soldiers were packed inside, shoulder to shoulder in rows facing outward, each encased in MASPEC Mk-2 armor. The suits were the color of dried blood, except for the clear half-domes of their helmets.

The Mk-2 was a more elegant and refined design, which stripped away the rough edges and mechanical look of the original, and replaced them with a more biological, rounded appearance. The new model incorporated a host of Eireki technologies that improved on human technology in every conceivable way, making the armor smaller, more agile and nearly three times as strong.

Amira Saladin had literally outdone herself. As her drop pod rapidly approached the ground, she hoped it was enough.

The Hoplite’s gravitic accelerator came to life at the last possible moment, slowing the pod as it met the ground, and giving the soldiers little more than a soft jostle. The vessel’s walls rotated outward and its canopy lifted, transforming it into an instant fort. Guns mounted atop it opened fire, their loud roar filling the air.

The walls finished reconfiguring and revealed the world outside in the dim light of early morning. The ground was scorched and covered in still smoking cinders, and a few hundred meters beyond lay the jagged line of alien outposts.

Her docking clamp released with a clank, and Sal prepared herself.

“You ready?” Kazuo asked beside her.

She grabbed her long Nikola rifle from its storage hook overhead, and said, “Let’s do this.”

The rapid assault carriers above fired fighter jets out like bullets, while armored soldiers streamed out of the Hoplite and into the smoking field. Once outside, the MASPEC troopers split into squads and advanced in leaps and bounds, assisted by small thrusters on armor’s back and legs. Their movements had a strange grace, and combined with their choreographed advances, the rush became a ballet.

Sal and Kazuo led the pack, bracing themselves at each landing before firing their rifles into the alien horde. The weapons ejected heavy metal rounds at nearly five kilometers a second, and hit their targets like tank shells. Soft targets were torn into arcing ribbons and mist, while hard targets buckled and shattered under the impact.

It only took a few moments for the aliens to react to the new threat, and their shining metallic shields slid around to protect them, but by then, the MASPEC troopers were among them and engaged in hand-to-hand.

In her armor, Sal felt unstoppable. She’d become a war machine, an angry titan, faster than the small furry aliens, better armored than the large grey ones, and stronger than anything else in the field. The aliens mobbed her but she plodded on with grim determination, feeling bones crunch beneath her armored fists, while Kazuo battled nearby with considerably more zeal.

Meter by meter, her squad thrashed through the opposition, littering the ground with shredded corpses. It wasn’t long before the enemy building was cleared, and they took the roof, gaining an open line of fire on their entrenched enemy.

Operations were carried out with surgical precision all along the perimeter, and the battle line was broken. Squads of MASPEC troopers stormed the forts, while their protean jets clashed with alien craft overhead. The Phoenix and its coterie of assault carriers hung in the air just above the Ark, raining down beams of burning energy on whatever remained.

With a thought, a tube on Sal’s shoulder launched a bright green flare into the air, signaling an all clear at her position. Then she and her squad hunkered down behind the battlements and opened fire.

Jack and his team sat atop a low ridge more than two kilometers out beyond the line. Human and Oikeyan alike watched the battle from relative safety, filled with disappointment, sadness and hopelessness. The one thing Jack was sure of was that he'd failed. The thought turned his stomach.

The arrival of strange warships and armored soldiers left them all baffled.

"You're even better than I thought," Kai said. "I really believed you didn't have a fleet." He trailed off with his weird laugh.

"We didn't," Jack said. "I don't know who they are. Are those Nefrem forces?"

"No. I mean, there's a resemblance but it's superficial. Whoever they are, they're good, though. Very, very good."

"So that's it," Charlie said. "The cavalry arrives and we win. No offense to your alien buddies, but I'm not exactly heartbroken. We should have a beer and call it a day."

Kai shook his head. "You think the legion will be routed? You expect them to just pack up and leave? They haven't even begun to fight yet."

He pointed out into the distance, where the adolescent city Yuon Kwon was only a thin, hazy silhouette. "This will escalate, I promise you that. Armored Alarhya will come out of the city, and airborne reinforcements are already on their way. Expect carpet bombing if things don't look up soon."

"So who's going to win?" Nikitin asked.

"I honestly can't say," Kai said solemnly, "but the one thing I can guarantee is more needless death. Deadlocks are never good for either side. In a war of attrition, there are only losers."

"So, how do you break a deadlock?" Jack asked of no one in particular.

"Give one side an advantage," Charlie said.

"Or present both sides with a bigger threat," Kai added.

Then, right at that moment, Jack was struck by an idea. It was, without doubt, the worst idea he'd ever had. It was perhaps the most terrible idea anyone had ever had in the grand and illustrious history of bad ideas.

That was how he knew it was going to work.

Chapter 50:

Right In Two

Kai sprinted out across the open steppe, the immense strength in his legs driving him nearly as fast the fighter jets above. Each stride covered tens of meters, and he hadn't even worked up a sweat yet.

He would soon enough.

As he came to the human side of the battle lines, he accelerated, and in several large leaps, moved from one embankment to the next, bypassing the soldiers completely and continuing into the scarred no-man's land beyond. Strange weapons exploded all around, blasting soil hundreds of meters into the air, but Kai was too fast. Too agile. He danced through the field, analyzing thousands of barking weapons, and calculated the safest path through. He was built for this task.

A continuous hail of hot metal surrounded him, but he weaved through it. He was in his element, and no creature on the battlefield could match him. He wasn't there to fight, though. This was just an obstacle course on the way to his objective. A warm-up.

He engaged his camouflage as he approached the Oikeyan side and became a ghost. The effect was imperfect, but combined with his fantastic speed and the chaos of battle, it made him virtually undetectable.

Hidden in broad daylight, he launched himself high into the air and used the fighting Yuon Kwon as terrain, leaping from the armored shell of one to the next. This part of his mission was so easy it was practically a game.

Then he came to the charred remains of the human settlement, which had burnt brightly throughout the night but was now reduced to smoking cinders. He sprinted at top speed, ignoring the ruins under foot and the human drop pods spitting fire over his head. He cut a path straight for the Ark.

As Kai came to the final stretch, he dug down deep, found the last reserve of extra power lurking inside him, and charged. He charged with everything he had. His feet ground deep into the ruined soil and the wind howled as he blasted through the thick air. He coiled his fist back and exploded through the titanium-steel door.

The metal groaned and buckled inward. Massive hinges on either side sheered under the force.

He was inside. His mission was half-complete.

Jack and Felix raced through the clotted skies, while a desperate air battle went on all around them. Cuttlefish and the strange transforming fighters chased each other in every direction, burping fire at one another as they careened about and fought for position.

Charlie and Lisa were understandably uncomfortable in the vehicle, while Nikitin was—beyond all sense or reason—having the time of his life. Behind them, Ferash and Dojer held their weapons at ready in case of unwanted followers. It was anyone's guess how effective their weapons would be, but Dojer's cannon was better than nothing at all.

The young city Yuon Kwon loomed in the distance, reminding Jack of the flying saucers in every old, cheesy horror movie. The last thing he ever expected was for aliens to show up in actual saucers, yet there they were.

A cuttlefish burst into flames above them and plummeted out of the sky, leaving a trail of burning debris in Felix's path. It reminded Jack this wasn't a movie; it was real life, and he was in the middle of a very real battle.

"I know I've put you through a lot, but if you could go just a little faster, I'd really appreciate it," he whispered to his mount.

Felix picked up speed, with a jitter that showed he was straining against his limits.

"Thank you."

They approached the flying city, a smaller version of the twenty-kilometer monstrosities which had taken up residence at the Earth's equator. This young one was just over a kilometer in diameter, and was an even more vibrant blue-indigo than its older kin, but was otherwise identical. His interior was only opened a crack, through which damaged cuttlefish returned and fresh ones came out.

The surface of the massive alien creature bristled with cannon banks spraying blue fire, while patches of liquid metal slipped across it to deflect incoming attacks. These were the defensive membranes Kai had mentioned, and their speed was startling.

Pilots in bony Yuon Kwon battle armor came flying out of the ship as Felix approached, and the stream of them never stopped. The six-armed

creatures headed off to join the battle, and Jack could only imagine what they must be like in combat.

Luckily, they paid Jack and his team no mind. No one did. To everyone's surprise, Felix was ignored by both forces equally, and they managed to slip inside without incident.

Even more surprising was the interior of the city Yuon Kwon, which was much different than Jack expected. The stalagmite-like buildings were nowhere to be found, replaced by row upon row of short, squat hangars. That wasn't the most drastic change, though. The generator towers were opened up like flowers in full bloom, revealing the large and furiously burning stars within, connected to one another by arcing bolts of golden lightning. Each tower was surrounded at the base by an arena-like structure, filled with the silver robed Sey Chen monks, all focused on the miniature stars above them.

With the easy part of the journey out of the way, Jack steered Felix toward the thick nerve bundle at the heart of the Yuon Kwon, and prayed for the best.

Kai navigated the maze of tunnels, and even at his unnatural pace, progress was tedious. His less than stealthy entrance triggered alarms that howled throughout the Ark. Emergency bulkheads closed, creating all new dead-ends and pointless cul-de-sacs. Every corner presented another set of guards with itchy trigger-fingers he had to avoid. They spent more time firing at their own shadows than at Kai, who blew past like a fierce wind.

He missed the days when he was allowed to kill indiscriminately. It made his job a lot easier.

Level by level, he penetrated deeper into the mound, running on walls as often as the floor. Each corridor was warmer than the last, and more packed with heavy tubes and pipes. That meant he was getting close to his target. So did the slow throbbing of his radiation detector.

Two, burning blue rounds streaked past Felix, and the tiny flyer juked hard to the side. "We've got company, Jack!"

"Really," he said with as much sarcasm as he could pack into the word, "I hadn't noticed, Nik. Maybe I should try to evade them."

Jack and Felix zoomed down toward the hangars and began weaving through the streets where the larger cuttlefish was too large to follow. It

stayed above and took pot shots every few seconds.

Nikitin and Ferash opened fire with their rifles, but the rounds plinked off the alien ship's armor without effect.

"-Are you planning to shoot any time soon, Dojer?-" Jack asked in Mirresh.

The rhino's deep voice sounded nervous. "-Not a good idea.-"

"Dojer!"

The Rozom put his autocannon away and brought out his artillery weapon instead, aimed at the cuttlefish and fired. It thumped three times, and the tiny flyer rocked under the vicious recoil, nearly flipping over in the process.

Jack and Felix struggled to stay upright. "Whoa!"

Roiling balls of smoke erupted along the cuttlefish's exterior, only to be swept away by the onrushing wind a moment later. The ship's hull was unmarked.

"-Told you it wasn't a good idea.-"

The cuttlefish fired again, this time aiming in front of the smaller Yuon Kwon. The blasts exploded in the thin alleyway ahead, and Felix instinctively made a hard kick-turn to avoid the rain of debris.

"Smooth," Jack said, and the flyer cooed in response. "I'm all out of ideas, little buddy, so if you've got something, I'd love to see it."

Felix asserted control and came to a halt, then ducked into a deeply shadowed overhang.

"What are we doing?" Lisa asked.

"Not sure," Jack replied, "but for right now, just have a little faith."

And they waited for the tiny flyer to make its move.

Armed resistance thickened the closer Kai got to the heart of the reactor complex. The cunning bastards had figured out his destination, and fell back behind barricades to wait for him. Every new tunnel was a trap filled with hot lead, and they were taking their toll.

Kai had done an admirable job avoiding their shots, but he could only do so much in tight confines, and now had several bullets lodged in his flesh. His muscles were adaptive, able to reroute around damaged areas and retain functionality, but every bullet also tore swaths out of his uniform, ruining his camouflage. He was becoming an easier target.

Running at maximum output was wearing on him, too. His body temperature hit dangerous levels, and his muscles were cannibalizing themselves for fuel. He was nearing his breaking point, and oddly glad for the challenge.

The deep red lights in this section strobed, and geysers of steam sprayed out from bundles of thick pipes. Kai sprinted down the tunnel, listening to the muffled sound of his feet hitting the floor. A junction loomed up ahead, and his cheerful mission computer was confident the turn led to the control room.

“So I should expect another barricade?”

“But of course, Sinit,” the computer replied. “How exciting!”

“Yes, terribly,” Kai said. “No easy way past.”

As he approached, the fingers of both hands keyed command sequences into his palms, then he curled his left hand into a fist. That hand’s knuckle-guard crackled with energy, while his camouflage faded and began to glow white. It grew brighter until even the light reflecting off the walls was almost too bright to look at.

He ran straight by the corridor and stopped on the other side, out of sight. The rhythmic bark of automatic weapons started and didn’t stop, while shouts of confusion and panic sounded over the roar.

When there was a lull, Kai went back. They were reloading. He jumped at the far wall, planted his heels and thrust against it, rocketing back down the opposite hall like a missile. Blind fire whizzed by and ricocheted around, but little of it came anywhere near him.

He struck the barricade fist first, and his knuckle-guard discharged into the metal. What was solid before became molten liquid spraying out in every direction. The super-heated steel coated the blinded soldiers, and they screamed as they fell to the ground.

Kai landed on the far side sprinted on, whispering an apology to Jack and his noble cause.

The cuttlefish hunted in erratic patterns, trying to figure out where its target had slipped off to. All the while, Felix shadowed its every move, hidden just a few meters behind and below. The cuttlefish had a blind spot, and Felix knew exactly how to exploit it.

After a few minutes of fruitless searching, the larger Yuon Kwon broke off and headed back toward the center of the city, apparently satisfied that

his target had been destroyed. Jack and Felix followed.

“You’re much more clever than I suspected,” Jack whispered, and Felix purred at his approval.

The fact that the cuttlefish was headed toward the nerve center was a little too lucky in Jack’s opinion, though. The last time he encountered luck like that, things didn’t work out very well, and he wondered what sort of curve ball the universe was about throw him.

The cuttlefish led them right up to the nerve center and then inside, where it finally disappeared into a darkened tunnel while Jack and Felix continued toward the heart. The inside of the nerve bundle was quiet and calm. There was no hint of the distant battle, or buzzing from the Sey Chen as charmed the miniature stars outside. It was peaceful there, and in the midst of mortal combat, that was even more alien.

They came to the core of the Yuon Kwon in no time at all. It was a round chamber shaped like a pumpkin, with bulbous alcoves along the outer wall. At the center of the room was a cradle like those found in every Yuon Kwon, but regal and ornate like a medieval throne. It was set into the floor, and surrounded by a ring of outgrowths shaped like kneeling worshipers.

Felix set down and released his grip on Jack, who stepped out with the others and walked cautiously across the floor.

The silence was deafening.

The others followed behind as he approached the cradle, step by shaking step. The pilot within was very old, his skin hanging loose and wrinkled, and covered with twisting tattoos and strange writing.

Jack had a feeling like when he accidentally walked in on his parents as a kid. He was somewhere he didn’t belong, interrupting something he wasn’t supposed to see.

He stepped between the outgrowths in the floor, reached out and placed his hand on the pilot’s shoulder. It craned its head back from the cradle and looked at him with its single, monstrous eye. There was no fear in that eye, only hatred.

“-Remove yourself or be removed,-” Jack said in their language.

The pilot spat on him. At the same time, the room’s defenses moved into position and targeted the group at its center. Jack raised his .45 and put a round in the pilot’s head with one quick motion, and the defenses fell limp.

He didn’t relish it, but it had to be done. There were lives to save.

The cradle relaxed and the pilot's lifeless body slid free. Dojer dragged the corpse away with a grimace on his face, while Jack stepped forward and prepared to link up.

"Are you sure about this?" Charlie asked.

"Not at all," Jack said, "but it's a little too late to change my mind."

He wiped the pilot's green blood from the cradle, then hunkered down into it and pressed his arms into the gaping orifices. The apparatus tightened around him, and his world disappeared.

The reactor control room was full of workers when Kai arrived, but the sight of him riddled with bullet-holes and covered in blood was enough to send them running. He sealed the door behind them and went to work.

He reached behind a terminal and grabbed hold of a shielded cable. He scraped its insulation away to reveal the bare wire within, then lifted a tiny probe from his wrist computer and placed it on the metal.

"Alright, I'm analyzing the network traffic," the mission computer said. "This will take a moment, Sinit."

"That's fine," he said, "no rush or anything."

While the AI did its work, Kai slumped down against the wall and tried to catch his breath. His body was on fire and he couldn't focus his eyes.

"Got it. I'm simulating the client interface and probing their network architecture. How interesting. There are nodes here that were definitely not designed by humans. No matter. I've finished mapping the network topology and have acquired root access. Shall I initiate self-destruct, Sinit?"

"Yes," he said. "Set it for twenty minutes, and revoke all client credentials except your own."

Emergency klaxons rang throughout the Ark. The computer went on, "Done and done, Sinit. I feel as though I should mention that I've calculated Jack Hernandez's probability of success, and it is vanishingly small. Yet I notice you're not moving."

Kai laughed. "Good observation."

"The foreign hardware has substantially increased their thermonuclear device's yield. My estimates show that the detonation will annihilate everything inside of this base and for some distance beyond."

"And?"

"Ahem. That includes you, Sinit."

"It does."

“So, you intend to die here?”

“I believe so.”

“You swore to fight the Nefrem to the last drop of your blood, did you not?”

“I did, but look where that got me. I’m responsible for the death of eight billion humans. I’ve done the Nefrem’s work for them.”

“And I will be destroyed as well. The sum of Somari knowledge will be lost and gone forever. Your people will be dead and forgotten, Kai.”

“Maybe it’s time.”

“Perhaps it is at that,” the AI said with resignation. After a pregnant pause, it added, “This has been a very long and strange journey, hasn’t it?”

“It has, but don’t worry,” Kai said to his computer, “it’ll be over soon.”

With that, Kai closed his eyes and tried to relax while the end approached.

Chapter 51:

Symphony

Jack mysteriously found himself alone, standing in a circular room ringed with windows, revealing nothing but whiteness beyond. The floor and ceiling were perfectly reflective, creating a vertical hall of mirrors with Jack trapped in the middle.

He was confused, and getting a little tired of it.

“Hello,” he called out, and his voice echoed back at him. “Is anyone here?”

He walked, but after a few steps, he was pretty sure he hadn’t gone anywhere. He felt like he was moving, but the windows were no closer than before. He ran but with the same result.

He cupped his hands to his mouth and called out, “Hello!?”

There was no response.

His imagination flared. Maybe he never escaped the prison. Maybe they’d been inside his head all along, and the past couple weeks were nothing but an illusion. They showed him the door, and he happily led them straight back to the Ark.

He needed to get a grip. One way or another, the world he was in had to be an illusion. It was a false veneer, hiding something important. What was it?

He tried to recall the past couple hours, but the memories were slick and difficult to get a hold of. They were loose, and came apart like over-boiled meat.

If he could only concentrate, he might be able to figure it out. He closed his eyes, metered his breathing and tried to focus on a single point. His inner voice ran non-stop, full of panic and distress, but he focused and tried to let go. Just let it go.

He breathed in and out, and perfect silence came to him for just an instant. There was peace, and he felt the other there with him. The other was massive and powerful beyond belief.

He opened his eyes and the room was gone, replaced by the simultaneous view from ten thousand eyes, stitched together into a bewildering panorama. A battle raged all around, and flying objects wove

complex patterns through the air. Jack felt and saw them all at once, and it was too much. Pain clawed into his head like a hot dagger.

He screamed.

The circular room returned, with its windows looking out on nothingness. It was filled with silence, as a glass overflowing with water. He was alone again, even though he knew the other was there.

He heard another voice in the distance that just barely crept above the silence. "Jack?" the voice said full of worry, "are you okay?"

"I think so," he said, or maybe he didn't. He was so confused. "I don't know."

He was in some kind of cell, but he wasn't sure whether it was for the other's safety, or his own. Maybe both.

"We don't have much time," the distant voice said.

Images flashed by so quickly he couldn't make any of them out, like someone fanned a photo album in front of his face. When the images were gone, he was left with a dull, metallic taste in his mouth.

None of it added up.

He closed his eyes and said, "Again."

The images flashed by, still too quickly for him to make sense of.

"Slower," he said. "I can't keep up."

They came again, but this time he caught sight of a few. Vessels like sea-shells, being torn apart in space by invaders. The images flew through his head again and again, until they finished with a roar that knocked Jack off his feet.

When he opened his eyes, he was still standing. The other had shown him an invasion. It was a war against an unstoppable enemy who ate the dead.

Jack could feel the other's anger. It was all around him, a giant set of jaws that were slowly closing. He was on trial.

He closed his eyes again and concentrated, but this time had a different focus. His thoughts were still slippery, but he reached down into them and dragged out every memory he could find. He brought to mind the face of every man, woman and child he'd helped during his career with the Corps. Every sad refugee and bleeding wound. Every last one. It got easier as he went, and soon the images came on their own.

Then he changed course, veering into the wastes of China where the aliens built piles of the dead and left them to rot. He remembered the family

he found in the cellar, and all the refugees who joined his pilgrimage to the West. He remembered his first glimpse of blue sky after months traveling through the dust, and the pain he felt when he learned his whole world had been smashed apart.

Finally, he remembered standing in the alien city, willing to kill his own rather than let the enemy's innocent children die.

Then he was back in that damn silence filled room. At least he knew why he was there, now.

"You've done to us what they did to you. Are you satisfied now?"

His voice didn't echo this time. It stopped dead.

"Are you listening to me?"

He closed his eyes and sought out the silence, and just like last time, the ten thousand eyes all over the creature flooded into him, but this time he was ready. The pain struck, and he felt like white water rapids were trying to sweep him away, but he clung on and focused. Focused.

There. He fought against the tide and shut out all the other eyes. He found the one he wanted. Out beyond the battle line, a hundred million human refugees streamed out of the Ark. They were running for their lives, and would never make it far enough in time. Neither would any of the soldiers still fighting on the line.

Jack imagined a white hot blast followed by a mushroom cloud, and hoped the image was clear enough.

The other turned from anger to panic. It couldn't understand why. It dug through Jack's head trying to find an answer, but he held the answer close and wouldn't let it out. He wanted to let the other sweat for a little while.

Then he spoke slowly, unsure of precisely how the other understood him. "Because this war will destroy us all. It will slowly bleed both sides dry until there's no one left to bury the dead."

The other listened.

"Unless we can find some kind of peace. Some way to work together. All I've done is make the threat more immediate, and now you have an opportunity to change the rules of the game. You can save millions of innocent lives from their own weapon, and create an opportunity to build a different tomorrow. Together."

It wasn't sure.

"Neither am I, but the only other option is to do nothing and watch everyone die. I'm not convinced that's such a bad idea, but the choice is

yours.”

It wanted to know how.

Jack imagined the silver robed Sey Chen all throughout the city, gathered in crowds around their miniature stars. Then he brought to mind an image of their shiny defensive membranes.

Jack’s mind was suddenly flooded with information from all over the Yuon Kwon, and he cried out. The other stopped, and Jack was back in the safe-room.

“Not all at once. I need you to help me.”

All was quiet for a moment, and then the other tried again but with only a trickle instead of a flood, while Jack gritted his teeth and held on for dear life. It wasn’t enough. He couldn’t keep his head above water. He was swept away against his best efforts, and the two became one.

Chapter 52:

The Quiet

Amira Saladin stopped firing as the humongous alien disc flew overhead and filled the sky. Its passing was followed by a pressure wave that knocked everyone—human and alien alike—off their feet. At the same time, all of the shiny metallic bubbles disappeared from around her opponents, leaving them unshielded. Something was happening. Something important.

“What’s going on?” she demanded over the command channel.

The channel was full of chatter and she couldn’t tell if anyone answered. Then she noticed a group of words that kept repeating. “Nuke. Get down!”

She crawled toward the edge of the battlement and watched the disc go by, then saw the wave of panicked refugees flooding across the burnt landscape between the Ark and their line. More came out of the fortress every second. It was a stampede, and it was coming right for her.

Then she saw the most amazing and inexplicable thing she could ever imagine. Bolts of lightning crawled all over the Ark, and the metal hatches began to glow red. The disc stopped above it, and thousands upon thousands of liquid metal tentacles reached down and stabbed into the hillside. They tore through the fortress, rooted around inside and came back with a dense chunk of over-wrought machinery covered in billowing clouds of steam.

The bolts of lightning clung to that machine, as if trying to drag it back into the hole.

With the machine held beneath it, the disc blasted up into the heavens and disappeared. A moment later, the sky was filled with a blinding flash as intense as the midday sun. Sal hadn’t seen anything remotely like it since she was five years old, when the Sirius supernova filled the sky.

Seconds later, she realized how close to being annihilated they had all come. Judging by the quiet all along the line, she wasn’t alone in that.

Space. The upper edge of the atmosphere was so pristine and beautiful. So empty, perfect and still.

Amiasha Aum-Samaraya had barely escaped the terrible explosion. The Sey Chen within had worked their magics and shielded him from most of the blast, but he was still badly wounded. His outer shell was cracked and smoking, and there was so much pain everywhere, outside and in, that he could think of nothing else.

He tumbled through the void. Aimless. Broken. He was so young, but maybe it was his time to die.

“Jack!” a distant voice called.

Gravity pulled him downward. He fell down toward the alien planet, hot air rushing up and over him. So much terrible heat.

Death approached. He could let himself break apart, and burn up in reentry. Then his pain would be over. Perhaps he had done enough to earn an honored place in the great beyond.

“You have to wake up!”

Whose voice was that? Amiasha scanned everywhere within himself, looking through each of his ten thousand eyes for the source of that voice, until he finally came to the chamber. There was something strange going on inside.

They did not belong. Land-bound. Oikeyan and Nefrem gathered in a circle around the cradle. His Alarhya dead on the ground, and a Nefrem joined to him instead. Who was that Nefrem?

“Please wake up, Jack.”

Flash. He was looking at his own body lying in that cradle. He was the city and the Nefrem at once. The tide rose up and swallowed him again.

After all of this, couldn't they just let him die? Let his suffering end.

The armor along his bottom was flaking away, exposing the soft inner flesh. He felt only the searing, white heat, blotting out every other thought.

The pain brought silence. The silence was a gateway.

Jack surfaced again, twitching between the circular prison and the reality of Amiasha Aum-Samaraya plummeting through the Earth's atmosphere.

It would all be over soon.

“Jack!”

But it wasn't just Jack that would die. Lisa, Charlie and Nikitin would also. Ferash and Dojer, too. It wasn't just Amiasha who would die. Sey Chen in the thousands would perish.

He couldn't allow this.

Thrust. His tired and bleeding organs surged into action, and he pushed. He fought against the unrelenting pull of gravity. Still the ground approached. Still the searing heat increased.

He poured everything into the struggle, but it wasn't enough. He didn't have enough.

When no hope remained, only then did he hear the chorus of the Sey Chen. They sang quietly but with beautiful voices, and their strength grew with every passing moment. Their singing filled him with light and life. The five stars burned inside of him, brighter, stronger and hotter than ever before, and he found new power.

Thrust.

The ground approached, and Amiasha Aum-Samaraya braced for impact. He howled out as he crashed into the Earth, and the ground split beneath him. The world quivered at his touch.

He was down and it was complete.

"Are you okay, Jack?"

He couldn't tell. His head hurt bad, like he'd been on an all whiskey diet for two weeks straight, and he felt displaced. Displaced?

He groaned.

"Can you open your eyes?"

He tried. Something was short circuited in his brain. He knew what he wanted to do but couldn't find the switch.

The darkness was kind of a relief.

Then he found it, and his eyes slowly creaked open. Everything was blurry. There was vaseline on the lens.

"Lisa?"

"Yup," she said.

His eyes began to focus, but the splitting headache continued unabated. "This seems familiar. I could really get used to seeing your face when I wake up."

She smiled.

"We don't have to run anywhere, do we?"

"Not this time, hero."

"Thank God," he said, and tried not to fall back asleep. At that, he failed.

Chapter 53:

Aftermath

Marcus Donovan and Vijay Rao walked down a wide, blue-green street overflowing with activity. There was so much foot traffic that Marcus could hardly see a few feet in front of him. It was another fine example of humanity's ability to cope in even the most dire of circumstances, and it impressed him and Legacy to no end.

Four months had passed since the Battle of the Ark, which unexpectedly ended with both sides withdrawing. The strange events at the end left the humans and Oikeyans equally vulnerable and confused, and retreat was the only option that made any sense. A tense cease-fire followed.

"Who could've expected this?" Marcus asked.

"I stopped making predictions about the future," Rao replied. "Was costing me too much money."

They pressed on through the crowd, and Marcus marveled at the multiple levels of the city up above, each built on its own web of catwalks. This was his first visit to the Oikeyan city called Amiasha, which had removed the Ark's self-destructing fusion reactor at the height of the battle, and saved countless lives. Afterward, the ship came crashing back down to the ground a few kilometers away, then took root in order to heal itself.

There was some kind of mutiny aboard the ship, but the details remained a mystery. The Oikeyan legion abandoned it, and beat a hasty retreat back to their colonies in Africa.

Meanwhile, the Ark had been torn to shreds, and a hundred million human refugees were once again homeless. It didn't take them long to come and investigate the city ship, like children poking a dead animal with a stick. But this animal was still alive. Just barely, but alive.

What they found was simply amazing; the only aliens left aboard the ship were the pacifist Sey Chen, who welcomed the refugees with open arms. The rest, as they say, was history.

Still, there were too many mysteries about that day for Marcus' liking, and clues were few and far between. Why was the Ark's self-destruct activated in the middle of the battle? How did the city-ship become aware of the impending explosion? Marcus had come down from orbit to find out.

As they walked down Amiasha's crowded streets, Marcus and Rao turned and cut through one of the many markets where people were busy selling all kinds of wares. At the far end, where the tents thinned out, they found the man they were looking for.

He wore a set of army fatigues that had obviously been mended a few too many times, and his skin was thoroughly pitted and scarred. It looked like someone had splashed molten lava on him. Still, he was all in one piece, which was better than many soldiers could say, and he'd found work as a guard for one of the new merchant class.

"Excuse me, are you Sgt. Karpov?"

"Commander Donovan?"

Marcus nodded, and Karpov snapped a salute. Marcus returned the gesture clumsily, sure he'd never quite get used to it.

"I wanted to ask some questions about the day of the battle, if that's alright."

"Absolutely, sir."

"I understand you were working guard detail in the reactor section. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell me what happened."

"It's all in my report, sir," the scarred soldier said.

"That's alright. I'd like to hear it in your own words."

And Karpov told his story. Unfortunately, it matched the debriefing reports to the last detail. Someone or something had breached the Ark at the height of the battle. Many described it as an invisible monster that ran faster than bullets. Karpov saw only a blinding light that rushed his position and melted a steel barricade with its touch. His was just another of the hundred ghost stories that came out of that day.

When Karpov finished, Marcus thanked him and went on his way. Someone out there had the missing puzzle pieces, and Marcus Donovan wouldn't rest until he found them.

Sixty-Seven

All beneath the heavens call my Tao great.
Because of its greatness, it seems strange,
But if it weren't strange, it would've faded long ago.

There are but three treasures I cherish and cling to:
The first is mercy, the second economy,
And the third is indifference to winning.
From mercy arises courage; from economy, generosity;
From humility, the power to effect change.

These days, men belittle mercy, yet celebrate courage;
They forget economy while exercising generosity;
They cast aside humility and always strive to be first.
Thus do they court their downfall.

Through mercy, struggles can be surmounted,
And defenses made impenetrable.
This is how the universe preserves and protects.

About the author:

Chris J. Randolph (hey, that's me!) is a writer, futurist and possible killer robot originally from Redwood City, CA. When not talking about himself in the third person, he's usually writing about fictional people who pilot spaceships, fight dinosaurs and seduce green women... and somewhat less often about green women who pilot dinosaurs, fight people and seduce spaceships.

His other interests include linguistics, cooking, video games and digital publishing advocacy. He's the proud recipient of several literary awards he made up himself, and he currently resides in Rocklin, CA, with a family who somehow puts up with his shenanigans. He hopes to someday own his own tropical dictatorship.

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